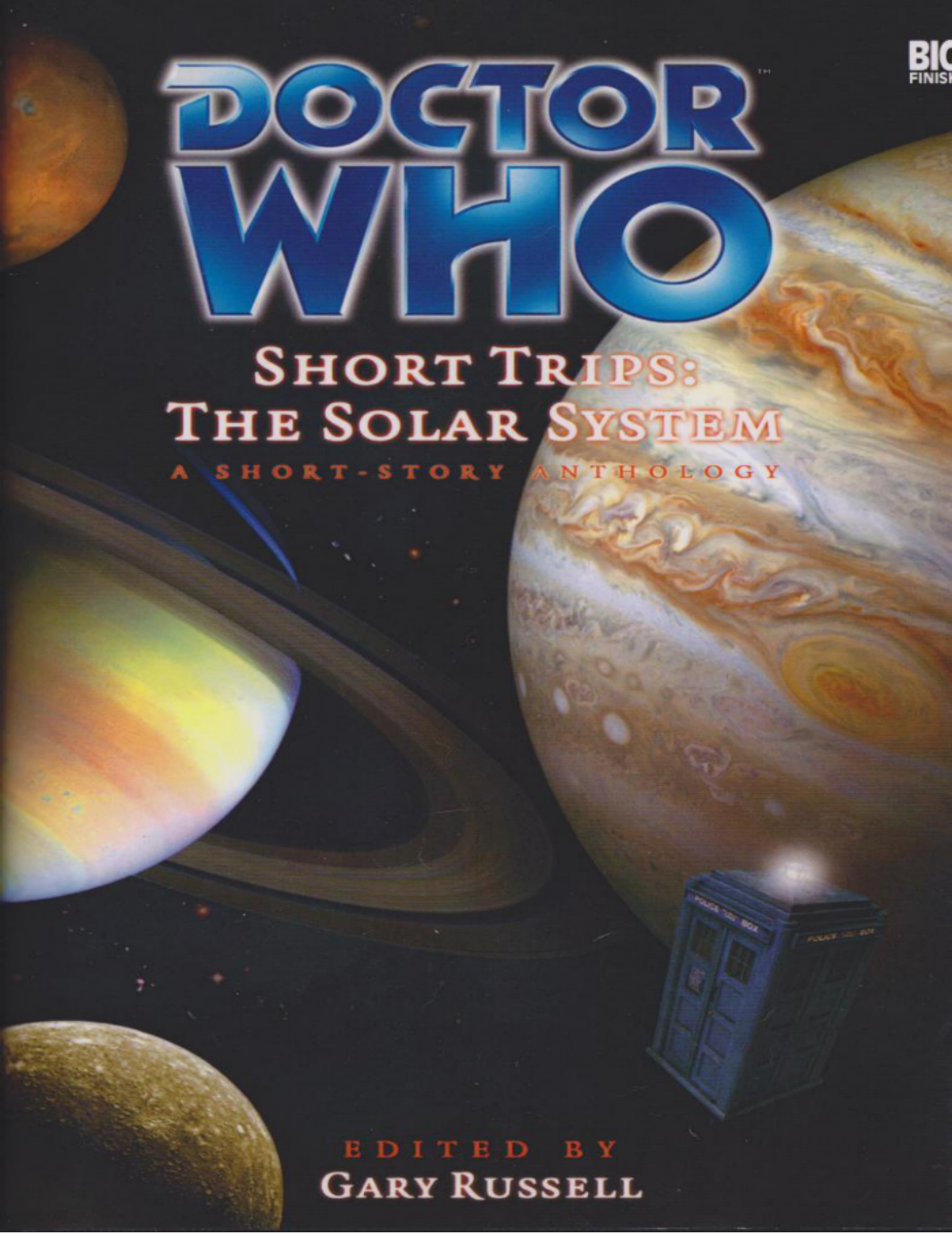
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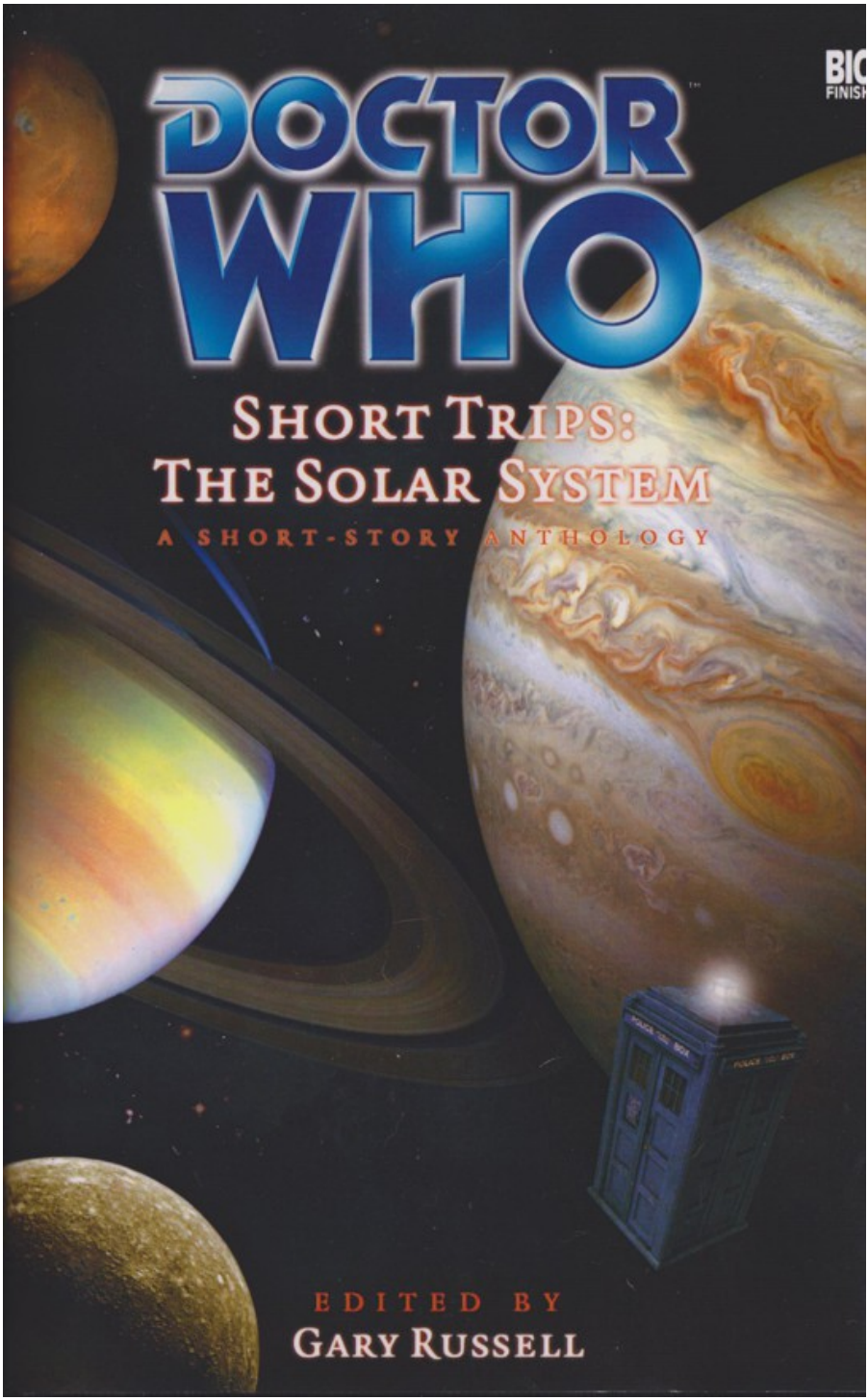
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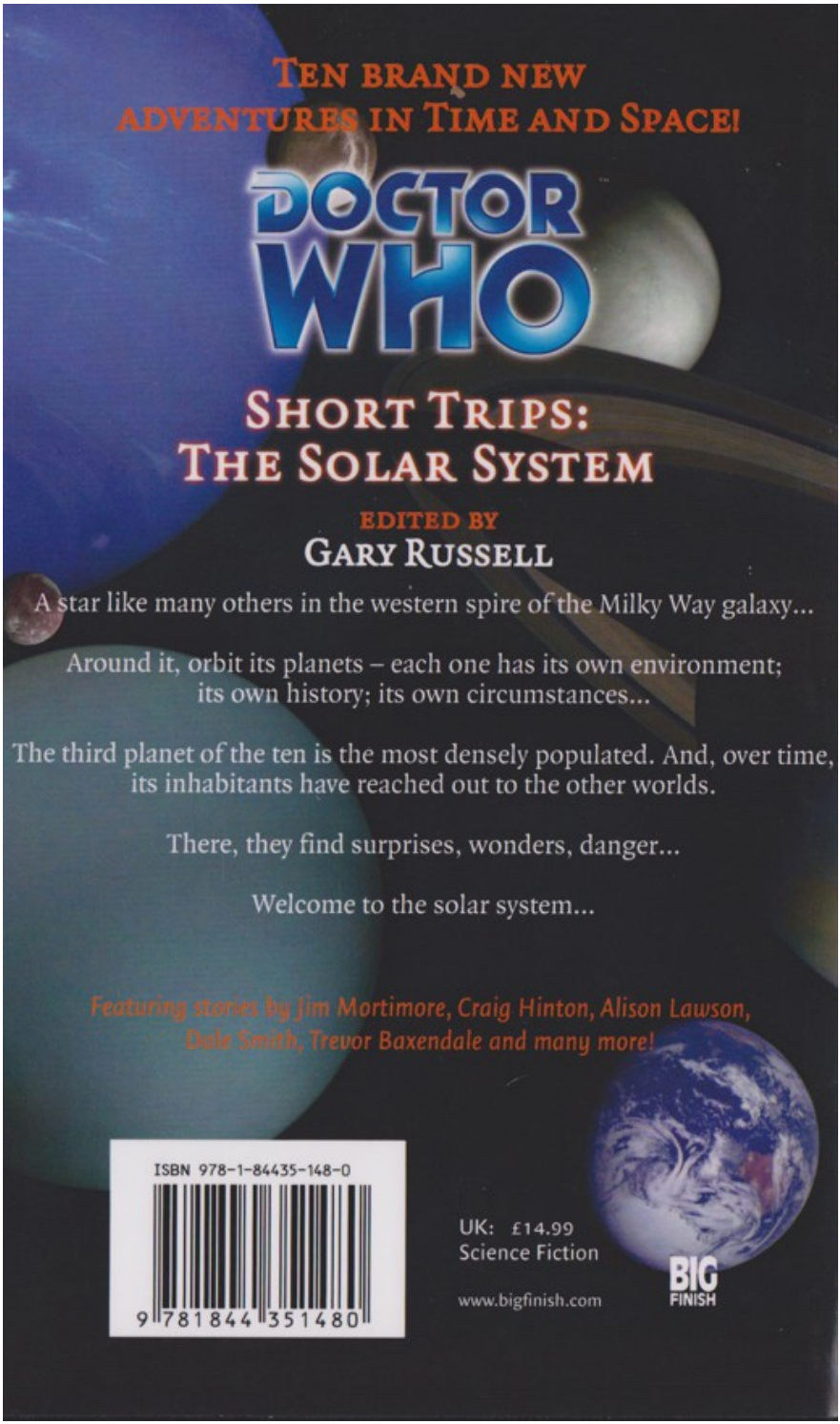
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1

Ed itor's Note

There seems to have been a certain amount of controversy regarding the tenth planet **in our solar** *system.* Although theoretical *as far back as the* nineteenth century, it was **only** *proven to exist in* 2003 and only confirmed as a planet in late July 2005. Its **name** is also the source of some confusion. In September 2004, the International Astronomical Union reportedly *accepted* the name *given* to it by its discoverers in 2003: Sedna, named after the Inuit *goddess.* As this broke with the Graeco-Roman **tradition,** *however,* this name is still not *officially recognised at the time of going* **to press and the body appears to**

`2003UB313

have reverted **to its** *original designation,*

'. In a few years' time, people may *be* reading this volume of short *stories and* saying, That Andy Frankham, can't *even get the name* of the planet

correct!' Rest *assured, it was the* editor's decision *to go with* Sedna, *so blame* **Gary Russell when, one day, it's really known** *as Vulcan... or Xena... or* **Caligula... or...**

Mercury

Eddie Robson

An Adventure of the Second Doctor,

with Jamie McCrimmon and Zoe Heriot

Zoe spread her arms wide to counteract the light motion of the surface on which she stood — balancing was difficult enough in these bulky

spacesuits — and looked upwards to fully appreciate the sky's faint glitter.

She supposed that the effect was created by the rays of this planet's sun, **creeping** over the horizon and reflecting off dust in the whisper-thin atmosphere.

The filtered light seemed to rob things of colour and form, making even

the TAMS — whose flat base stood uncertainly on the curved surface of **the** dome — appear oddly grey. Depth and perspective descended into

Insignificance, creating an uncanny sense of unreality: a scene that

seemed artificial and yet more than real. A less intellectually rigorous soul **than** herself might have called it magical.

A jolt under her feet almost caused her to stumble but she refused an

offer from Jamie to hold her steady. From the corner of her eye she saw the **Doctor** emerging from the TARDIS and walked in his direction, mentally **ordering** her observations of the curious dome: it was white and perhaps N much as half a mile across, mounted on a pair of rails along which it

slowly progressed. The rails were dead straight and remarkably flat, **having** been laid at the bottom of an artificial channel carved from the **rocky,** cavernous ground. The wider landscape could only be seen when

the lip of the channel came low enough. Zoe had ideas about the dome's **nature** and purpose and intended to share them. However, as the Doctor **locked** the TARDIS doors behind him he cut across her with a triumphant **apprehension** of his own.

'Mercury!' he cried, his voice sounding too loudly in the radio of Zoe's

helmet. She flinched.

'Oh,' Jamie groaned wearily, 'don't tell me we've run out of that stuff

Win.'

'**No,**' said the Doctor, 'not the element. The planet. We're on Mercury.'

'**How** can you tell, Doctor?' asked Zoe.

'**Well,** I've made a rough map of the stars,' the Doctor said, gesturing at **the sky,** 'and plotted them relative to Earth, and, well...' He glanced **around at** the landscape. 'Well, it just looks like Mercury. Doesn't it?'

Zoe tutted. 'I wouldn't call that a watertight hypothesis.'

Òh, I'm fairly sure I'm right,' said the Doctor. 'And if I'm not, so what?

We'll get a lovely surprise later, and I like surprises.'

`But, Doctor,' said Jamie, gingerly stepping towards his companions in

the unfamiliar gravity, 'isn't Mercury quite close to the Sun?' He said this hesitantly: he didn't like being wrong, and frequently was. 'Well,

shouldn't it be hotter than this?'

A number of facts collided in Zoe's mind. She attempted to leap in with

her comprehensive and satisfying explanation — but the Doctor beat her to

it. 'Mercury is hot, Jamie — but it's also quite cold. You see, Mercury rotates much, much more slowly than Earth — it takes weeks to perform a full turn.'

Àlso, the planet's orbit partly works *against* the rotation,' Zoe quickly put in, ignoring the Doctor's indignant stare. `So a solar day here lasts around six months. Now, each side of the Earth is warmed by the Sun during the

day and cools at night, but never gets a chance to get really cold before day comes around again. But because the nights on Mercury are so long, the

dark side gets very, *very* cold — even though the light side is very hot.'

Ànd that's where these come in!' the Doctor interrupted, pointing to

the rails that protruded from under it and away in a die-straight line

to the horizon. 'This dome travels along the rail, very slowly —'

`So that it stays —' Zoe cut in.

Ìn continual position —' continued the Doctor.

`Placed between the light and dark —'

Àt a certain point in the cooling process —'

`Where it stays at the optimum temperature —'

Ànd avoids much of the solar radiation on the light side,' the Doctor

finished, exchanging an irritable look with Zoe. Ì'd say it's a human

outpost...' he mused. 'Nobody except Earth would take such an interest in

Mercury, it's not really on the way to anywhere... Yes, I'd say this is some kind of outpost for monitoring solar activity.' He tapped his foot on the

surface of the dome. A light vibration rippled across the surface, then

began to grow alarmingly stronger.

`Doctor!' said Jamie. What've you done?'

Ì don't know!' said the Doctor, his voice distorted by the persistent

shaking which rattled up through his spacesuit 'Oh, my word, if this lasts

much longer we shall all be shaken off! Both of you, lie down flat!' Jamie

and Zoe did as they were told. Both tried to combat the violent motion by

gripping the surface, but this proved impossible: the dome was

completely smooth under their gloved fingertips. Ì think,' said the

Doctor, shouting above the rattling of their own spacesuits, 'that it's

being caused by a faulty section of track. Just hang on and perhaps —'

`Doctor!' shouted Zoe, pointing at something behind him. The Doctor

turned to see the TARDIS rocking, sliding and ultimately moving

alarmingly away from them, along the downward curve of the dome.

'Oh, no!' said the **Doctor and tried, without** success, to climb to his feet **and chase after his ship. The craft toppled away and over the visible edge of the dome, prompting a cry of anguish from the Doctor.**

After a few minutes the shaking subsided and the three travellers were **able to stand. They turned to face the direction from which they had just come** and made out the TARDIS, receding several hundred metres into

the distance, lying on its side **in the corner of the channel like a dead battery** tossed into a gutter.

'Oh,' said Zoe. 'Now what?'

'Should we not jump off and get after it?' asked Jamie.

The Doctor stepped a little way down the slope. 'It's a bit of a drop,

Jamie. I don't want any ofus breaking our necks. It would help ifwe could **ask them to stop this thing, really...'**

'Oh, we'll be fine,' said Jamie. 'The longer we stand around here the

less chance we've got of getting back to the TARDIS.' He strode

purposefully towards the back end of the dome, but his way was blocked

by a hatch which abruptly opened with a hiss of escaping air. A

spacesuited figure clambered out with desperate haste and regarded the

three of them, catching her breath. Jamie fully expected her to blame **them for some recent mishap**

'Thank God you're here,' the woman said. Her voice was rather high in pitch, and she spoke with an Australian accent. She gestured to the hatch.

'Follow me, inside!'

The four of them descended through a dark, foam-padded tube and then

an airlock into unadorned living quarters with pale grey walls,

a table, two chairs and a bed, all of a uniform design. Everything was very new, so the place did not look 'lived in' despite the clutter. Clothes, books and various pieces of portable electronic equipment were scattered across the floor, along with a man in his late thirties who looked equally

scattered. He was bent at an awkward angle between the wall and the

floor, and so although he looked tall it was difficult to be sure of this; he WS also unshaven and his skin was pallid. He looked lazily up at the

figures as they entered, but didn't focus on them: instead, he allowed his eyes to wander back and forth inside their sockets.

The Australian woman removed her helmet and the Doctor, Jamie and

Zoe followed suit. The woman was not tall (but taller than Zoe), and

although she was pretty there was a hard set to her mouth. She had fair

hair in a short bob. Zoe noticed Jamie grinning and sliding his tongue

over his lower lip, despite this woman being as much as ten years older

than him, and tutted just loud enough for him to hear. The Australian

woman crouched down in front of the man in the corner and spoke

slowly, loudly and clearly.

'Oleg?'

The man continued to move his head, but attempted to keep his eyes

fixed on the woman as he did so. This game appeared to entertain him,

because he smiled.

'Oleg, did you move anything?' said the woman. 'Did you do anything?

Change anything?'

`Help against the giants,' mumbled Oleg.

`Doctor —' Zoe started, but the Doctor motioned for her to be quiet.

The woman rose and walked to the one of the room's doors: it had two,

including the one from which they had just entered. 'The lock? You didn't

undo the lock again, did you?' She touched the controls and the door

started to slide open: hurriedly she touched the controls again and it

closed again. With fierce, sharp movements she operated more of the

controls and strode back to Oleg. 'I told you not to touch the door controls!'

she shouted at him, although her high voice made it more of a shriek.

`Please!' the Doctor declared, placing a hand on each of the woman's

shoulders and gently guiding her away from Oleg. 'Look, let's be a little

calmer about this, shall we? Why don't you tell us who you are, first?'

The woman took a deep breath and sat on the bed. 'Sorry, eh? I *flew* off the handle a bit, didn't I? It's just leaving the doors unlocked makes me

panic.' She ran a hand through her hair and then extended it in

greeting

to the Doctor. 'Alison Kolitz. I was hoping you'd be Space Corps but

I guess beggars can't be choosers. Your friend said you were a doctor...?'

The Doctor shook her hand. 'Yes. How d'you do? This is Jamie and Zoe.'

He glanced at Zoe, then leaned in a little closer to Alison. 'And we're on...

Mercury, yes?'

Alison gave him an odd look. 'Yeah course. Where'd you think you

were? Alice Springs? After you've gone past Venus, it's a fair bet the next

planet is Mercury. But you heard the distress call, yeah?'

Èr...' said the Doctor. 'Not very clearly.' He pulled a chair out from

under the table and sat opposite Alison.

Alison clicked her fingers and gestured in the direction of the table.

`Could you pass me that computer?' she asked Jamie, who turned to look

at the mass of stuff, reached out his hand and hovered it over various

pieces of equipment. Zoe, realising that he couldn't identify one from

another, picked up what looked like a large white tray with grey jelly set

inside it, only the 'jelly' didn't ripple when it moved.

'Cheers,' said Alison, taking it from her. She operated a switch on the

back and the surface responded with a friendly glow. A few touches of the **surface** and it loaded a picture, which she held up for all to see.

The image was of a humanoid creature, taller than most humans,

perfectly smooth and silver. Its arms ended in points, its legs tapered **down** but ended in flat discs which served for feet. Its head was wedge-shaped and squared off at the top.

'We found him outside,' said Alison. 'Actually I found him. I was out

getting samples, I drove out in the buggy about fifty miles into the dark **side** and there he was, stock still. I actually didn't think he was alive, **I didn't** know whether he ever had been, ***even. I*** thought ***he might be, like,***

the weirdly decayed remains of something? So I tipped him onto the back of the buggy and took him back to the twilight zone. Then when Oleg

there was trying to take some samples off the thing for analysis... it **must've** sort of woke up. I wasn't there when it happened but I was

coming in the other door when the thing was just leaving. It heard me or **sensed** me or whatever and turned around, but I managed to lock the door **before** it could get back in the room. He stood at the window for a while, **watching** me, and then he went away. And Oleg, he was unconscious and

when he came around he was just, y'know, like he is now.'

4 Jamie looked over at Oleg. 'What was he like before?' asked Jamie.

Alison looked exasperated. 'Only one of the cleverest guys I ever knew.

sign **A solar** physicist. He wanted a sample of the thing to see if there was any **of** exposure to the Sun. He was sort of in charge here — what do you

know about this place? The Sunwatcher I mean?'

'Br— not much, I'm afraid,' said Zoe.

'Really? The launch was a pretty big noise in the media, I thought? Well,

we've only been active about three months, the crew's only five, we're due **to have** more people come up for the second solar *day*. The main purpose **is to** monitor the Sun, yeah? But that's not what I'm doing here: I'm a mineralogist. We've —' Oleg started to mumble again and

thrash around.

Alison visibly tensed, took a deep breath and reached under her bed for a **dark** grey box. `Nah, that's it. I'm going to sedate him.'

Zoe walked cautiously over to Oleg. 'What do you think's wrong with

him, Doctor?'

The Doctor turned. 'He doesn't seem to be processing anything, does

he?'

y , **'Brain** damage?' Zoe said, then spoke to Alison. Was the creature **tarrying** anything? Like a weapon?'

'**Not** that I saw,' said Alison, moving over to Oleg's side with a pen-like **device,** 'and it didn't drop anything either. Where the thing had touched 7

him there was a burn through his clothes to his shoulder, but that's all.'

She pressed the device to Oleg's upper arm and operated it, and as his

movements gradually slowed she manoeuvred him into a prone position

on the floor.

said the Doctor, removing the rest of his spacesuit and

straightening his rumpled jacket and trousers. Jamie and Zoe did the

same- Jamie was dressed in kilt and black sweater whilst Zoe wore a black

and white plastic mini-dress.

Òh, jeez,' Alison said to Zoe, 'don't tell me those are in style again.'

Zoe wanted to protest, but was interrupted by a chirping sound from

Alison's computer. Alison picked it up and touched the screen. 'Is that

you, Chelo?'

A woman in her late forties appeared on the screen and spoke with

a Mexican accent. 'Alison?' she asked, then heard the time travellers talking amongst themselves. 'Who's with you? Is that Guto?'

`No,' said Alison, 'there's some people turned up. They're not the rescue party but they heard the distress call.'

`How're they gonna help?' said Chelo. 'They got weapons?'

`No,' said the Doctor, sitting down on the bed next to Alison so that he fell within the camera's view, 'but we do have experience ofsuch matters.'

He ignored Chelo's sarcastic laugh. 'How long has this creature been aboard, and what do we know about it?'

Àlmost i8 hours,' said Chelo.

`We don't really know anything,' said Alison, 'except that I found it on the dark side, where it's colder, so I figure it was bringing it into the warm that woke it up.'

`Yeah,' said Chelo, 'or maybe it was waiting for you to bring it inside so it could catch us off guard? Did you think of that?'

`Get real!' said Alison. `So it stood out there for however long and waited for me to get curious and bring it inside? That's a pretty oblique plan don't you think?'

`Quite right,' said the Doctor. `Hmm . What's your power source here?'

`We have three solar pylons,' said Chelo, 'mounted on the tracks on the light side, moving around to catch the best of the Sun.'

`Hmm . I hoped you might be running on static. Well, that's no good...'

Then the Doctor's face lit up. Àh! Assuming it becomes incapacitated at

the temperature at which Dr Kofitz found it... If we speed the forward

progress of the station, it will move faster than the rotation of Mercury

and into the dark side, yes?'

`But we have emergency thermostats,' said Chelo, anticipating his plan.

`The internal temperature of the dome will simply rise to compensate.'

8

k

'Oh. Can't you override the thermostats?'

'**I** couldn't,' said Alison. Tut Chelo could do it, couldn't you Or

Wayne.'

'**If** he's alive,' said Chelo. 'We haven't heard from him lately. Anyway, **what's** going to stop us from freezing?'

'**Our** spacesuits,' said the Doctor. 'They have their own internal heating

'**,stem,** don't they? They'll keep us warm, then when the creature's frozen **We can** safely put it in storage.'

Chelo made a non-committal noise. Alison chewed her lower lip.

Tknow, that's actually pretty good,' she said.

'**Better** than nothing,' said Chelo, shrugging. She looked extremely

eked. '**I** can't do it from here. I'll try to get to the orientation room.'

"**Don't** go yet,' said Alison. 'We'll see if we can work out a way to isolate **him away** from —'

'**Shhh!**' said the Doctor, and it quickly became apparent why: the faint **who of** footfalls was sounding through the door's ventilation grille.

Someone was running down the corridor.

Or something.

Alison put her computer aside and stepped to the door. She took

nervous-looking sidelong glance through the glass and started in shock when a skinny,

Afro-Caribbean man ran past, then checked his run and

lime back to the window. He hit the door control then, realising it was

locked, agitatedly demanded that Alison open it for him. She did so and **he**

door

ducked inside, practically bouncing off her in his haste. Alison shut the **and** set the lock, then introduced the newcomer as Wayne Songo'o

had asked him where he'd been hiding all this bloody time.

'**Mess** hall,' said Wayne, still getting his breath back. 'I was having MI6

wor

with Guto. Stepped away from the table to see if I could — huh

out why the colour guns on the food machine have been playing up.'

Ilk removed his rucksack and reached into it. 'Do you need food?

brought some.'

'**Oh,** yeah,' said Alison appreciatively, and Wayne handed her a package **with a** foil wrapper. 'Anybody else?'

Jamie accepted and Wayne handed him one too. 'We ate just before we

hit the TARDIS!' Zoe admonished him.

That

is it?

was nearly an hour ago!' said Jamie, unwrapping the food. 'What

' **he** asked Wayne.

Mouthwatering

, delicious generic white meat substitute,' deadpanned

Wayne. 'A bit like turkey, a bit like chicken. Usually you can tell by the **odour but** at the moment everything's coming out blue.'

of the machine has a sticker on it saying In ***case*** **of** malfunction call this 9

number,' said Alison between bites. 'We called it but they never came.

Funny, that.'

The creature, Dr Songo'o?' asked the Doctor.

Wayne turned to him. 'Who are you?'

Òh, sorry,' said Alison. 'This is the Doctor, and Zoe and...' Her eyes

narrowed as she tried to jolt her memory.

`Jamie,' said Jamie irritably. He started to say something else, but then

stopped and stared past Alison's shoulder.

`What is it?' asked the Doctor, following Jamie's gaze. At the window

set into the door through which Wayne had entered could be seen a silver

head. The figure stared impassively into the room, or at least it had the

aspect of staring: it had no visible eyes and, although it appeared

impassive, its featureless face made it impossible to imagine it appearing

any other way. The pale blue colour scheme of the corridor was reflected

dully on its body. It betrayed no reaction when everybody in the room

turned to look at it. Wayne leapt nervously and Alison steadied him.

` What's happening?' asked Chelo, still in contact via Alison's

computer.

Alison returned to her bunk and looked solemnly into the screen. 'It's

here.'

Òutside your quarters?'

Ùh-uh.'

Chelo was silent for a moment, then spoke quickly. 'I only need a few

minutes. I'll go now — let me know if it moves.' She cut the connection.

`Nor shouted Alison in alarm. 'Chelo! Chelo!'

`What's she doing?' asked Wayne.

`Heading for the orientation room. Idiot!'

`What? Why?'

`Because you're here now, I was gonna send you out through the airlock

and over the top.' Alison stood up, kicked at a table leg and kinked it,

causing Zoe to flinch and Jamie to look impressed. Alison explained the

Doctor's plan to Wayne.

The Doctor took a step closer to the door, turned to Alison and asked,

`You're sure he can't get in?'

Alison nodded.

The Doctor stepped right up to the door and craned his neck towards

the reflective face in the window. 'Would you mind going on with your

story, Dr Songo'o?' he said without turning around.

The, uh, well, when that appeared,' Wayne said hesitantly, nodding at

the creature, 'I was reaching around the back of the food machine and...

uh... I suppose it didn't see or hear me. It went over to Guto and just stood 10

is front of him. Guto was still finishing his dessert. Don't know why he

didn't run, he just froze up.'

'Mm-hmm,' said the Doctor, using his reflection in the creature's face

to adjust his hair. `Go on.'

'And after a minute or I don't know how long, the thing just touched

him, he cried out and slumped on the table. The thing stood over him, **maybe** waiting for something, I don't know. Then he left and I came out **(Tom** where I'd been and locked the doors. I've been there since then.

Onto came around but he was like — well, he was like Oleg is.' Wayne

swallowed. 'I don't know where Guto is now. He... went out.'

Òh,' said Alison. 'I did hear someone operate the airlock... I went to see **when** I heard it close. Someone must have gone out. Whoever it was they **haven't** come back in... and there are no spacesuits missing.'

said the Doctor gravely, walking past the door whilst gradually

descending into a crouch as though walking down a staircase. 'How many

airlocks are there?' he asked from his crouching position. Then he mimed **climbing** back up. Still the creature showed no reaction.

Ònly this and the main one at the head end,' said Alison, 'which as I say **has** access to the orientation room. This one's like an emergency exit —'

'Oh,' said the Doctor. 'Look.' The creature had abruptly walked away, as **if bored.**

'Chelo!' exclaimed Alison, picking up her computer and linking into

the **surveillance** system. The others gathered around the screen, which Alison **was able** to translate into 3D. A six-inch-tall impression of Chelo crept **across** the surface of the monitor: in reality she was walking through **a fairly** narrow corridor, but the model omitted the walls and made her Seem exposed. The image flickered and seemed over-lit. Alison called

Chelo's name and hurriedly issued a warning over the tannoy: 'Quick, **duck** inside a room, the *thing* just left the corridor at my quarters which **probably** means it's about to come out of the next intersection...' Chelo this, turned and hit the nearest door control but the silver creature **entered**

the monitor from the opposite side and strode in Chelo's

direction, its feet turning into spikes as they rose into the air and **flattening**

off into discs as they were planted onto the ground. Its shape

tops elegant but its gait was uncomfortable, lumbering. The door closed

behind Chelo but before she could lock it the creature opened it again.

Chelo ran off the edge of the monitor and Alison cut to a different camera angle

, revealing that Chelo had walked into the central storage and

supplies hold. There was another door at the opposite end of the room, **but it was** locked and as Chelo punched at the controls, her hands clumsy **with** panic, the inevitability of events made Wayne turn his eyes away. It 11

sank in for Chelo and she turned to face the creature and, as its spiked arm pressed against Chelo's shoulder, Alison turned off the display.

`Wayne?' Alison said after a few seconds.

Zoe expected Wayne to protest, but instead he quietly agreed. 'If,' he

added, 'somebody else keeps that thing away from the orientation room.

I don't want to come down through the fore airlock and find it

waiting.

I need a diversion.'

The Doctor beamed and turned to Jamie, who rolled his eyes. 'Aye,' he sighed. 'That'll be us then.'

Ten minutes later, the rear airlock hatch opened and a spacesuited Wayne emerged, then he reached back in and assisted Zoe's ascent. She had insisted upon coming with him as an extra pair of hands, but his take on the situation seemed to *be* that she didn't trust him to do things properly.

It was as though he were judging her by age and manner, as if she was from one of those hothouse academies for junior geniuses: he clearly didn't like her attitude, but Zoe didn't it take personally.

As she emerged from the airlock, something on the dark side caught her eye: a long distance down the channel, the faintest of the Sun's rays were being reflected back at her. The pinpricks of light looked like a sea, but surely the only water on this planet was at the poles? She pointed the phenomenon out to Wayne.

Ì don't know,' said Wayne, preoccupied with the more immediate goal. He told her to start walking. 'When the station gets moving, we'll see what it is soon enough.'

Meanwhile beneath their feet, the Doctor crashed into Jamie at an intersection and fell to the floor. Jamie hoisted him back into a standing

position. Both clad in their spacesuits, their movements were unusually

clumsy.

Ìs it following you?' Jamie asked.

Ì don't know,' said the Doctor, catching his breath. 'I find this place

terribly confusing, I have to admit.' The corridors were tight and all the

same shade of light blue, and both the Doctor and Jamie were struggling

to make sense of the space. The Doctor consulted the black-and-white

printout Alison had given him, a floor plan of the dome, and traced the

paths with his finger. 'There are two routes to the orientation room, and

there are two of us. I think we should each try to close one off, so if you go there...'

`But what if we lead the thing exactly where we're trying to keep it away

from?' said Jamie. 'I say we head for the opposite end —'

12

'Jamie, this is not the time to argue!' said the Doctor, jabbing his finger Into the map. 'You head that way and turn right — I'll go this way.'

Jamie grudgingly agreed and they split up.

Yet just a few paces down the corridor, Jamie heard a cry of alarm from

behind him and turned to see the Doctor dashing back in his direction.

***On**

stick

second thoughts,' he cried as he passed Jamie, 'perhaps we should

together!' The silver creature marched stiffly around the corner from

Which the Doctor had just come: Jamie, his feet slipping on the smooth

floor

, pelted after his friend.

Alison

into

finished the frustrating business of getting the unconscious Oleg

a spacesuit. She had insisted that the creature's victims needed to be

protected as much as themselves: although she could see the logic in

prioritising those crewmembers who still had all their faculties intact, she Needed to believe that something could be done for the damaged. Partly

because she was afraid it would happen to her too.

c She only had the gloves and helmet to go when a call came through on

bet

end

computer from Wayne. 'We've made it,' he said. 'Are you ready at your

?'

.'Good as,' said Alison. 'Go when you're ready. What about the Doctor

Old Jamie?'

The Doctor locked the door behind him, whilst Jamie allowed himself to

al against the wall and slide to the floor. 'Hey Doctor,' he said, 'there's Soother door on yon wall. Should we not lock that?'

'I think it's locked already,' the Doctor replied, 'but better safe than lorry.'

'How d'you know?' asked Jamie: then he recognised the room, its rows

if racks and plainly marked strongboxes. A short while ago he had seen it Ncreated

the

in miniature, and seen a tiny woman being pursued across it by

creature they had just evaded. As he and the Doctor crossed the

&Nance from one end of the room to the other, he saw that same woman

life-size

, sitting cross-legged in the corner and allowing her hands to take

6

Jamie's in turns to gently slap each other. She didn't register the Doctor and approach.

v 'The Doctor instructed Jamie to look for a spare spacesuit for Chelo

Whilst he used a communications unit to let Wayne know that they were

Secure and would need about ten minutes to get Chelo into a spacesuit,

then the acceleration could start.

1.1 'Lucky

to

we ended up here, eh?' said Jamie. 'She'd have probably frozen

death otherwise.'

13

`Luck nothing,' retorted the Doctor. 'This is precisely where I planned —'

His eyes looked past Jamie towards the door through which they had

entered and Jamie turned to see their blank-faced adversary staring in

once again. 'Come on,' said the Doctor. 'Let's help Dr Chascarillo into

a spacesuit, shall we?'

Chelo looked up and into the creature's face. 'Help against the giants,'

she said, relatively coherently. 'They bask in the Sun.'

Once the acceleration was under way, Zoe climbed back up the airlock

chute, against Wayne's advice, and onto the surface of the Sunwatcher.

She made her way to the dome's peak and gazed through a set of

MagnifEyes

in the direction of the lights she'd seen, adjusting the device

to sixty per cent magnification. The screen sprang into life and Zoe took a

few seconds to adjust to its unnatural, flattened perspective.

Then her eyes widened, although not to see better.

At her best count — which was usually fairly accurate — there were Soo

more of the silver creatures, to all intents and purposes identical to the

one currently inside the dome. All were frozen in poses of running:

some

stumbled, some had fallen, some rested in exhaustion. They filled the

width of the channel and as a consequence their mass entirely blocked the

Sunwatcher's path.

At the dome's present rate of progress, Zoe estimated that it would

reach the first of the creatures in around 13 minutes.

She radioed the Doctor.

`What can we do, Doctor?' asked Jamie anxiously after Zoe had outlined

the situation and the Doctor had told her to let him know if the creatures

began to move.

`Well, we don't know at precisely what temperature they come into

action,' said the Doctor. 'So we'll just have to hope we can contain our

friend here —' he nodded at the creature, who still stood at the door —

'before the crowd out there becomes more lively.'

The temperature was indeed dropping inside the dome, but, the Doctor

feared, not fast enough. The instruments on the wrist of his spacesuit read

three degrees Celsius, and the Doctor guessed they'd need something

substantially below zero to make a difference. They now had less than ten

minutes. The Doctor paced around anxiously.

`Don't,' said Chelo suddenly.

Zoe did not quite see the moment it began. At the front of the crowd,

the

smallest flushes of heat from the twilight of Mercury were easing the

joints of the first rows of the silver creatures as the planet's rotation finally took them into another day. Spiked feet edged closer to the ground.

Unexpectedly, one of the creatures took an abrupt step forward. Its foot

Battened and spread slowly over the rock.

Within seconds Zoe had activated her radio. 'Doctor?' she said. 'It's

Started.'

The Doctor acknowledged Zoe's message. Jamie crouched down beside

Chelo and tried to calm her down.

'Please don't make me cold again,' said Chelo. 'Turn to solid. Gone too

long already... don't make me cold.'

'No, no,' explained Jamie, 'you'll be fine. We've put you in a suit to keep you warm. It's just yon beastie out there we're trying to freeze.'

'Yes,' said Chelo, not looking at Jamie but at the creature outside. 'Me.'

Both Jamie and the Doctor followed her line of vision. The creature

slowly moved its arm upwards and flexed it inwards to point at its own

bee.

'Me,' said Chelo, and the creature moved its arm back and forth for

emphasis

. 'Me.'

be **didn't need the MagnifEyes to see the silver mass by this stage. The features were still moving slowly and awkwardly, but this made little**

difference as they and the Sunwatcher were on an inexorable course for

loth other. With this in mind, Zoe thought it wise to go inside again. She boded

Alison's

for the rear airlock and radioed Alison to let her in. Entering

rado

quarters, Zoe started to speak but Alison, listening intently to the

in her helmet, shushed her.

'What is it?' whispered Zoe.

f ‘Chelo's talking,' said Alison.

Chelo creatures

had been shown things. She had been shown a precis of the

' history, too dense to be properly understood but enough to tell

Selo that the creatures were indigenous to Mercury, living in caverns on

die light side and coming into the sun to absorb energy. Chelo had been

shown the creatures concealing themselves from the humans who had

sewed a mysterious channel around the equator of the planet; been shown

die

investigate

creatures massing in the channel in their tens of thousands to

channel

the phenomenon; been shown them walking along the

they

, trying to ascertain its secrets. At a point close to the twilight —

were about to give up and turn back — Chelo had seen the creatures

Out in fright as three giants rose from nowhere; the giants had flexed

their six monstrous arms and proceeded menacingly towards Mercury's

terrified inhabitants. She had seen the beleaguered silver creatures fleeing in all directions, teeming over the sides of the channel. In the panic, many had been trampled underfoot and many were still in the channel as it

passed through a mountainous region, too steep to climb out before night

fell.

Chelo had been shown a single creature, blessed with greater speed but

less sense than his fellows, who had been one of the first to escape but

failed to check his direction, running too far into the twilight in his haste to get away. As his body seized up, he had attempted to turn back but

could no longer muster a speed greater than that of Mercury's slow

rotation.

Time had passed.

Chelo had been shown a human woman, looking curiously at the

creature before hefting it into her vehicle; had been shown the creature

gradually regaining the power of movement and trying to make contact

with the humans. She had known the creature's desperation as this plan

failed, then dismay as the cold started to return.

Chelo, her disordered brain acting as a conduit for the small amount of

silver matter which had entered her body at the creature's touch, did her

best to explain all of this to Jamie and the Doctor, and they seemed to

understand.

The silver creature — whom the Doctor had dubbed a 'Mercurial', which

Zoe felt was somewhat twee but it had stuck — stood in the corner of the

orientation room, having agreed (via Chelo) to keep its distance from the

others.

The Doctor, Wayne, Alison and Chelo sat around what Alison referred

to as 'the captain's table', which *seemed* to be the source of a private joke between herself and Wayne. She looked at Chelo as if expecting her to

laugh. Chelo was still moving awkwardly and showing very few, if any,

signs of her normal personality, but the Doctor was optimistic that

something could be done for her and Oleg. The Sunwatcher was on its

way back to the twilight zone: the mass of stranded Mercurials had

climbed to ride on its surface.

Wayne and Alison agreed, in principle, to assist the Mercurials against

these monsters who had evicted them from the light side, following the

Doctor's argument that the humans were uninvited guests on the planet

and this assistance would go a long way towards ensuring that they

became welcome ones.

Ì have to say,' stated Wayne, 'although we're equipped with cooling

16

systems, shields et cetera to survive on the light side in an emergency, i Wouldn't go there out of choice.'

'We have a notion,' said Chelo. 'You will be safe.'

'There y'go,' said the Doctor.

The Mercurials stood atop the Sunwatcher and faced towards the Sun,

whose

forward

rays gradually bent over the horizon as the structure began its

progress into the planet's light side. Relaxing into the light and

heat, they made no effort to keep their structure and instead allowed the

'radiation to ease them into their most natural — although not their most

practical

— state. They sank down, becoming stocky and wide-footed; their

heads shrugged down into their shoulders; their arms elongated and

emerged into the widening pools of their feet. As they flattened down and **mended** outwards, they began to overlap. They slid and shuffled around die surface and, when the dome's entire area was covered, they clung fast.

They reflected almost all of the white light and white heat away. Had you

been

S**unwatcher's**

able to stand on that light side of Mercury and watch the

progress, there is a fair chance you would have been blinded

before it crawled an inch. Inside the dome no difference in temperature

Was perceptible.

'YOU know,' said the Doctor, 'I'm actually a little bit chilly in here.'

(a **Zoe ignored him and watched** the front viewscreen, on which could be **seen** the section of track immediately ahead of the Sunwatcher. Chelo and Mercurial had been watching it for most of the journey. Even though

the screen compensated for **the** intensity of the light on this side, the **difference** z**one**

between this and the diffuse, colourless light of the twilight

was striking. This side of the world glowed in reds and yellows. The **locks *swelled*** with colour. The light reflected off each lip of the channel, **awing**

sky

the edges with a slight fuzzy glow which separated them from the

. The Mercurial was bathed in the gaudy light, which softened it and pve it definition but also lessened its former elegance.

tit+ **Zoe's** eyes started to hurt, so she turned back to the Doctor and asked **his plan** regarding these so-called giants.

Àha!` cackled the Doctor. 'Dr Songo'o tells me there's a solar pylon **about a** hundred kilometres ahead of us. When **we** catch up with it, **propose we** couple it to the front of the dome. The Mercurials have living **dine**

conductor

which has very similar properties to a metal, and acts as a

. We'll allow them to tap into the power supply, they can snake

awards

shock

each of these creatures one by one and — zap! — rather a nasty

!' He cackled again.

17

`How do you know it'll work?' said Zoe, folding her arms. 'And —' she

lowered her voice — 'how do you know the Mercurials are telling the truth?

This whole thing may not be as black and white as it seems, you know.'

The Doctor also lowered his voice. 'Well, yes, I think maybe we should

assess the situation when we get there — but there are rather a lot of them,'

he added, pointing at the Mercurial behind his hand, 'and I'd rather they

thought we were on their side.' He then raised his voice to its normal tone.

Ànd if it doesn't work, well, I'm sure we'll think of something.'

Across the room, Chelo emitted a cry of alarm. She and the Mercurial

were still at the viewscreen, and the Doctor and Zoe stepped up behind

them to see the first solar pylon looming into view, a tall isosceles triangle bearing lateral panels which tilted back and forth in response to the

sunlight. Wayne was slowing the Sunwatcher's forward progress in order

to couple it to the front.

`What's the matter?' asked Alison. Chelo looked fearful, whilst the

Mercurial tensed as if preparing to run.

The Doctor drummed his fingers on his lips, then addressed Wayne.

`Do these pylons fold down when they're not in use?' he asked.

Wayne looked at him in puzzlement. 'I can control it from here, and you

can see it if you like...'

Ìf you would.'

Wayne stepped to a control panel and inputted some commands. The

solar panels smoothly folded into the main body of the pylon and the

whole structure neatly collapsed flat onto the base.

`Thank you,' said the Doctor. 'Now... could you bring it back up again?'

Wayne did so and the process reversed.

`Does that look familiar?' the Doctor asked Chelo and the Mercurial,

and indicated the six solar panels. 'Six arms. They rose from nowhere to

bask in the sun, and chased these poor creatures away. Actually, they were

tracking through the channel to find the Sun. Would this be one of your

giants, by any chance?'

Chelo nodded.

`But Chelo knows what they are,' said Alison. 'Why doesn't she

recognise them?'

The Doctor sighed. 'She sees them as our friend here sees them.' He

turned and walked from the orientation room. 'Well, that's a shame. I was

rather looking forward to teaching some bullies a lesson. Zap!'

Following reassurances regarding the non-threatening nature of the solar

pylons, the Mercurials accompanied the Sunwatcher back to the twilight

zone, picking up the TARDIS as they went. The Sunwatcher didn't even

Brie to stop: the Mercurials simply reached out a long loop of silver

matter, dragged the Doctor's ship out ofits resting place and drew it up to stand steady on the dome. Upon reaching the twilight zone they peeled off from the dome one by one and started to make their way back to the light

side .

By the time the Doctor, Jamie and Zoe emerged from the airlock, there

WAS not a single Mercurial left on the dome. Zoe looked around. The

Wow had drained from the landscape once more and created the eerie,

lineal space she had seen upon arriving here.

'Oh,' said the Doctor, looking in the direction of the gradually

disappearing crowd of aliens. 'I was hoping we could see them off.' He

Waved at them cheerily.

'Hey, Doctor,' said Jamie as they walked towards the ship. 'Have they

'cone something funny to the TARDIS?'

'What?' said the Doctor, slightly alarmed. 'What do you mean?'

1' 'I don't know,' said Jamie. 'It looks sort of grey.'

Zoe tutted. 'It looked like that before,' she said as the Doctor opened the r. 'It's a trick of the light.' She stepped inside, followed by the Doctor Jamie: then, as the sounds of the TARDIS's dematerialisation started,

:

die

light

vibration caused it to rock gently on the dome's curve, its flashing

describing a small white circle in the air, before it disappeared

gether.

4

1 9

r

Venus

Stuart Manning

An Adventure of the Eighth Doctor,

***with Charlotte* Pollard**

Charley Pollard looked up appreciatively, watching the shifting bands of

colour float above her silently. 'It's beautiful,' she finally managed.

nothae

The Doctor leaned forward from his armchair and poured himself

cup of tea. 'Beautiful, but deadly,' he smirked indulgently,

meeting her gaze through the steam of his drink.

The Doctor was in the mood to hold court, and Charley was only too

g to provide him with an audience. At first glance, he was a dashing

schoolboy

e with flowing brown hair and elegant clothes, yet a streak of

recklessness shone through the facade. She was his

panion, a self-proclaimed 'Edwardian Adventuress' who had found in

footsteps all the adventures she could ever have wished for. Tonight,

antique-strewn

ever, was an exception — a rare opportunity to relax in the

haven of the TARDIS and enjoy one other's company.

,h Charley's eyes drifted upwards again. It felt warm and secure inside the chip's cavernous control room. Conversely, the greyness of the sight

Ilhe &hove her conjured up memories of smoggy winters back on Earth, and ghostly sounds ofa crackling fire danced around *her* ears. Where the control room's rusted iron girders should have reached the ceiling, there cos instead only the swirling slate grey expanse of the sight outside. This pas the TARDIS scanner; a projected window to the world outside the

dme machine.

The Doctor seemed oblivious to its spectacle, but it was

• piece of trickery Charley had never quite adjusted to. Whether

instinctivley darting into the shade to avoid non-existent rain, or flinching

***the sight ofa racing meteor, the scanner's images always *seemed* a little too real to trust.**

against The Doctor watched his companion impatiently, his head propped up the threadbare velvet cuff of his jacket. He fixed her with his sharp

any eyes and repeated, more insistently: 'Beautiful, but deadly.'

Charley smirked back at him, pushing her blonde fringe from her eyes.

***in I supposed to react?'**

'I don't know what you mean,' he protested.

'Beautiful but deadly, indeed!' she snorted. 'You and the TARDIS

are

a pair of frightful old hams!'

21

A flash of feigned hurt. 'It is beautiful though, isn't it?' beamed the

Doctor.

She nodded. 'Indeed it is. But deadly?'

The Doctor tilted his head slightly and gave a measured pause before

whispering: 'Beauty can be a deadly thing. Do you know where we are?'

`You said it was local to me, though I doubt it's Knightsbridge,' she

replied drily.

`Local in a manner of speaking. You're looking down on the planet

Venus.'

She looked surprised: 'It looks so peaceful.'

À peaceful sight indeed. And that peaceful sight is a raging storm of

sulphuric acid.'

`Beautiful but deadly,' she rolled her eyes, playing along. 'All right, I see your point.'

The Doctor sipped his tea and leaned back, his chair creaking slightly.

`Venus was a goddess of arts, love and beauty — a beguiling combination

and an apt name indeed. Her surface consumed by ever-churning storm

clouds, she reached out to embrace those men who first walked amongst

the heavens.'

Charley drew her heavy jumper close around her, sensing the

prickling

of a draught. The Doctor's gaze shifted slightly, and a smile flickered

across his mouth as he noticed her move. 'For Venus seemed almost *alive,* and those few who survived her gaze deemed her a warning to the curious.

Legends abound ofthose bewitched by her beauty and then drawn into her

atmosphere.'

His voice dropped to a whisper as he craned his head closer: 'Drawn to

her atmosphere, before being sucked into the depths and vaporised by

searing heat.'

His performance completed, he slammed his cup and saucer down

triumphantly, gleefully noticing her flinch.

`Then._ then why do people visit, if it's so dangerous?' demanded

Charley, not to be beaten.

`Very astute, Miss Pollard,' conceded the Doctor, thoughts darting

across his face as he considered her question. 'People continued to visit,

however.' He clasped his hands together and tapped his chin slightly. 'Yet,

like a vengeful goddess, Venus saw off her explorers and would-be

colonists. This is a place of superstition, where no man dares to tread.'

Finally he was silent and the only sound left was the crackling of the

phantom hearth.

`Frightful old ham!' giggled Charley.

* * *

Some time later, when the TARDIS materialised, it might have landed in

I forest. Certainly that was Charley's first thought, as the door creaked open and she squinted into the light, adjusting to the new surroundings.

'So where are we, Doctor?'

`Haven't a clue,' echoed the reply from the depths of the ship.

Biting her lip, she glanced around idly. 'It's like a sort of glade. I think those

are trees.' She frowned slightly and nodded to herself: Definitely

trees. Admittedly, she wasn't used to trees with luminous red bark, but

f lacy seemed to be trees. And usually trees didn't bury their roots in shiny polished granite floors, but she felt happy enough with her definition.

Yes, these were trees.

'Very pleasant,' beamed the Doctor, as he closed the door behind him.

Ìt's like some sort of strange forest,' whispered Charley, realising how

F. melodramatic that sounded out loud.

'It must reach up quite a way. Maybe the branches form some sort of

canopy

?' said the Doctor, rocking his head slightly as he weighed up the

`Didn't the TARDIS have any clues?'

'hope. Somewhere near Venus, I suppose. We haven't travelled too far

from there.'

'We're not on the planet then?' said Charley apprehensively.

'Oh, no, not at all.' The Doctor licked his forefinger and held it in the 4, air. 'A clement evening's breeze. On Venus that would be enough to strip 1' the flesh from your bones, before pounding them to dust.'

'How cheery.'

He grinned broadly, oblivious to her sarcasm. 'Hmmmm... It's quite

a mystery where we've landed. Time to explore, I think!'

A forest was a forest, Charley told herself with slight impatience. The

Doctor was less easily convinced however, so what should have been

a brief stroll had turned into an extended expedition, with him

scampering between the trees inquisitively, occasionally producing

a **random piece of equipment from his pockets to take a reading or**

observation.

`So, the verdict is?'

'The verdict, Charley, is that things are rarely what they seem,' he said tersely, putting a twisted metal instrument back into his waistcoat pocket.

'Well, you must *have* some idea by now, surely?' she said pleasantly, hoping that it didn't sound snappy.

`Well, my considered verdict is...' He stuck out his bottom lip petulantly, putting his hands in his pockets.

Ìt's a forest.'

`Yes,' came the sheepish reply.

`But still, it's a very unusual forest,' she said kindly.

Ìsn't it?' he beamed excitedly, forgetting his disappointment 'Stone

floors, those strange formations! Yes, it's quite remarkable.'

Ì suppose so,' said Charley blandly, wishing he'd reached his

conclusion half an hour earlier. 'One thing though, where does the light

come from?'

`You noticed that?' he said, impressed. He paused and surveyed the

space for dramatic effect Despite no obvious light source, they could see easily, albeit in a muddy red haze. 'Well, it doesn't come from above,'

mused the Doctor, looking up to see the great scarlet boughs reach into

the darkness.

Ìt's almost like it's all around us — like a glow,' offered Charley.

`Yes,' said the Doctor slowly, his eyes narrowing. 'So where are the

inhabitants?'

`What inhabitants?'

Èxactly!' he said eagerly, now on a roll. 'A dead area of space that isn't, strange glowing orchards with stone floors. Yes, definitely a possibility.'

The sound of a gong echoed around them, resonating through the

branches before scuttling into silence.

`Told you so,' he nodded sagely.

Charley darted her head around, sensing something lurking on the edge

of her vision. The Doctor cocked his head slightly, picking up on her

reflex. Without sound, one of the trees seemed to twist into life. Charley blinked and realised that it was the outline of a figure. Definitely human she decided, widening her eyes as she tried to make out more.

And then another. And another. The Doctor turned on his heel, sensing

footfalls approaching. There *were* maybe twenty of them now, each moving forward silently. Charley's senses prickled as she realised they

were surrounded. She clutched the Doctor's arm, but he seemed quite

unfazed, smiling placidly as he waited patiently for the group to approach.

`Doctor, I really wonder if we should hide?'

Too **late. Charley stepped back slightly, but the Doctor seemed to be rooted to the spot. They approached, more distinct as they moved closer.**

First an elderly woman, tall and elegant, with a silver brooch around her high black collar. Then a man in a striped waistcoat with a kind face and twinkling eyes. Next a child with a sad stare. The Doctor raised a hand to wave, but seemed to think better ofit. More and more of them filed by, one by one, each not seeming to notice the Doctor or Charley. Silent, relaxed, but all with the same sense of purpose set into their features.

'A few moments later, Charley and the Doctor were standing alone

'n, both feeling slightly bemused. The Doctor looked at the departing

res, disappearing into the distance. He almost felt insulted — he

y drew a stare at the very least.

'curiousier and curiousier.'

Os ,'Don't be pretentious,' gloated Charley.

'A place of the dead, where the living fear to tread,' he whispered.

She pursed her lips. 'Doctor, this morbid turn of yours today is really to tiresome. Though they did seem a fairly motley bunch.'

'Motley indeed. Did you notice the way they seemed not to notice us?'

'Like they couldn't see us.'

Nor the Doctor insisted. 'They definitely saw us. They just didn't seem rested.'

'We could follow them,' Charley suggested helpfully.

Y' Before the Doctor could respond, they were disturbed by the sound of teps, this time more urgent and irregular. A woman darted from een a twisted pair of tree trunks, struggling with her earring as she Between her frantic tugging and tottering gait, she made for a slightly sight, but her hopeful smile towards Charley and the Doctor ested she was friendly.

'Oh, thank heavens,' she gushed dizzily, abandoning her earring and **Slipping** towards them. 'I thought I'd missed everyone.'

'We just did,' said the Doctor quietly.

'Stupid watch stopped, y'see? Always has to happen at the wrong time, **doesn't**

her

it?' The woman was small and timid-looking, at slight odds with rich red outfit. Charley smiled sympathetically. The woman smiled lock self-consciously and Charley guiltily realised she was staring.

4 'I know, not my colour is it?'

'It's charming,' said the Doctor. 'Perhaps we could join you?' he

Suggested, flashing a winning smile.

. **'Oh,** please do!' she said eagerly, beginning to walk. The Doctor and
4

Charley followed. 'Well, at least I won't be the last one there.'

'We can be fashionably late,' said Charley, hoping that *she* hadn't **loused** offence.

'Or just late,' the woman tugged at a lapel. 'You really think it's okay?

' ,mean, this is a pretty swish do. I don't want to let the side down.'

Conversation 'Yes, it should be fun,' said the Doctor, knowingly guiding the

. Charley was impressed at how businesslike he could be

when it came to finding his feet amidst a mystery.

'Truth be told, it's not really my thing,' the woman admitted. `Kinda

posh but, y'know, you have to try new things, don't you?'

2 5

Àn admirable sentiment. I'm the Doctor, and this is my friend Charlotte

Pollard.'

The woman looked shocked. 'You're not meant to say things like that!'

Òh.' The Doctor looked crestfallen.

Ì mean I don't understand it myself, but rules is rules,' she explained

warily, embarrassed at his reaction. She looked around her shoulder.

`Well, since we're getting personal, I'm Scarlet.'

Èvidently,' said Charley, glancing at the woman's dress and

immediately cursing her own tactlessness.

As they wandered slowly through the forest's gloomy red corridors,

Charley found herself growing impatient for the second time that day.

Though obviously a decent person, Scarlet's nervous monologue quickly

became deeply grating, made worse by the Doctor's apparently insatiable

enthusiasm to hear more.

`My husband wouldn't come with me, you see,' she yammered, holding

a lipstick to her mouth in anticipation of a pause in her speech that never

came. 'He'd be happier if I stayed at home forever, I swear. Again and

again I told him he'd enjoy it, but he'd rather stay at home and read his

paper.' Her voice lowered as she failed to suppress her excitement. `So

I snuck out without telling him. Just upped and left!'

Òh,' said Charley, a little too sharply.

Scarlet laughed. 'He's probably sitting there waiting for his dinner to be

cooked!'

The Doctor's eyes darted between them.

Ì just saw this opportunity and ran for it, I guess. I mean, probably it's

not my thing but there's gotta be something about it, to make it worth

doing, don't you think?' She didn't wait for a reply. 'But he just can't

understand it. He's had the same haircut for forty years; he bought the car

his father bought. I swear, given the choice of interplanetary travel or

a night in front of the TV, the footy scores win every time.'

`But you're a long way from home, surely,' said the Doctor quizzically.

Òh, yeah, I mean that was the point, wasn't it? Even though this place

has been a bit of an adjustment,' she gestured generally at their

surroundings.

`Still getting used to that,' lied Charley.

Ì just keep telling myself what an honour it is being here,' said Scarlet

in a forced whisper, gesturing around them. 'I mean we all thought that

when Mr Aristede said he'd retired that was the last of it.'

`Yes, I'm very much looking forward to meeting Mr Aristede,' enthused

the Doctor. Charley frowned at him, before realising just how efficiently

he was sizing up the situation.

'Yeah, isn't it exciting? It's not every day an artist like him announces his farewell

exhibition, is it?'

'Yes, I can't wait to see it,' said the Doctor casually. Charley threw him II smirk — she had to admit, he knew how to get results.

'I think I might be a bit out of my depth,' Scarlet whispered, even

though there was no one to overhear them. 'I was very surprised when I

was invited. I mean you hope, and dream of it, but luck never works out

the way you expect, does it?'

`You'll be fine,' said the Doctor, aping her whisper. 'Anyway, I'm sure Mr Aristede will prove himself a fine host.'

'Oh, I do hope so,' she trilled. 'He sounds fascinating.'

`So why are you so worried about the reception?' asked Charley, feeling

that she should contribute something to the Doctor's polite interrogation.

Scarlet tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. 'Well, y'know I just

filled out the form and hoped for the best. And then when the invite

arrived — fancy envelope, embossed in silver — I didn't dare to open it. But,'

she giggled nervously, 'I knew it was meant to be.'

'I see,' said the Doctor pointedly.

Ànd to think, he chose me from all those applicants — personally!'

Ì've got a golden ticket,' replied the Doctor, smiling uneasily.

Charley didn't miss the sinister note in his voice.

When they arrived at the gathering, Charley was relieved that their

entrance went unnoticed. The mood was more relaxed than she was

apecting, with groups of spectators chattering in low voices over drinks.

'Well, I'm going to go mingle,' announced Scarlet excitedly. Ta-tar

The Doctor waved as she disappeared into the distance. Charley looked

around her shoulder and appraised the guests. After the strange

encounter with the group in the forest, she felt instantly suspicious, but the Doctor seemed to have totally forgotten about it. Taking two fluted

glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, he handed her the first and

wielded the second like an actor with a new prop.

Ì think we should take our friend's advice and mingle ourselves,' *he*

decided.

`They didn't seem very friendly earlier.'

`That's a good enough reason to befriend them.'

The Doctor whistled to himself in approval as he looked around the

space. Much like the strange forest, it seemed to be woven from the trunks of the leafless red trees, with massive branches closing high above their heads like a giant's handshake. One end of the hall was dominated by

a huge set of hanging drapes, while at the other, smaller trees sprouted up 27

to create stairs and walkways. 'A wonderful space, Charley,' said the

Doctor, casting an admiring glance. 'But where are the exhibits? '

A severe-looking elderly man in a tweed jacket eyed the pair of them

suspiciously. 'I beg your pardon. Did you say exhibits?'

`What else would one expect to see at an exhibition?'

`You do know why you're here?' He looked deeply shocked.

There was an uneasy pause. 'This is very good champagne,' said the

Doctor, quickly waving his untouched drink in the air as proof. 'I must

declare it's hit me right between the eyes.'

Outraged, the old man looked as if he might do the same.

Òh, Doctor, fancy you getting squiffy at a time like this!' chided

Charley, taking her friend's lead. 'You must excuse him.'

Ìndeed I must,' said the man unconvincingly. 'Perhaps you should tend to your addled friend, madam.' And, with a final disapproving look, he was gone.

`Pleasant crowd, aren't they?' said Charley, taking a sip.

A handful of ignored greetings was enough to dissuade Charley from trying to make friends. Even the Doctor's attempts to blithely persevere seemed to fail. So it was a relief when the hubbub of conversation was halted by the sound of the gong they'd heard earlier.

Ì think it's time to meet our host,' said the Doctor, rubbing his hands together.

Ìf he's anything like his guests, I think I'd rather not.'

The Doctor put a finger to his lips, before pointing high above them. She looked up and saw the man standing at the top of the highest walkway, leaning against the gnarled barrier. Only then did she sense the rapt attention of his assembled audience.

`That would be Mr Aristede,' said the Doctor.

A tiny faraway figure, he still managed to command an instant reaction.

Stout, imposing and impeccably dressed. Across the room, Charley saw Scarlet's mouth drop open. The gentleman took a wobbly step forward, easing his considerable weight onto his ivory walking cane. The crowd rippled slightly with appreciative whispers. Another step forward, this time with more confidence. Charley could now get a clearer view. His

face

was stern, with a heavy jaw and puffed cheeks. His magnified eyes blazed

through the pebble-lenses of his pince-nez, framed by a shining bald

scalp. Eccentric certainly, but a charismatic figure nonetheless, Charley

decided.

`My friends,' his voice echoed, hoarse and rasping, 'I welcome you to

this gathering. Each and every one one of you has been specially chosen to

be here tonight.' Pockets of the audience bristled with pride. 'Our mission Is to conquer a vengeful goddess. Legends tell of her dangerous beauty,

warning mortal man to look but not touch. Today those legends are

rewritten!'

With a flourish, Aristede directed the audience's gaze towards the huge

set of red curtains that dominated the space, like a theatre proscenium

embedded into the matted foliage. With a curt nod, he gestured to his

,assistants, who moved to open the stage with well-rehearsed precision.

Charley arched her neck to get a better view. As the drapes slid open,

a stream of grey light forced itself through the gap, playing across the anxious faces of the audience.

There was an appreciative intake of breath as the curtain fell to

the

ground in a dance of billowing silk, unveiling the sight beneath. At first Charley thought it was a huge canvas, grey and blank, but as she looked,

she was aware of the slightest flow of movement. Familiar and alien at the same time, in an instant Charley knew what she was looking at.

`*Venus,'* breathed the Doctor.

At first it had been a pale block cut into her vision, but then the image seemed to take form, like smoke dissipating on a breeze. Almost too pale

to see, at first, but now there was definite movement. Slight stripes of shade stroked from left to right, drifting lazily along, like oil on a puddle.

It was strange and disorientating, like an ocean of milky water, but the

calm and scale of the sight was curiously welcoming. A sleepy feeling of

peace weighed on her eyelids, and for a moment she felt like she would

happily float away into its pallid depths.

A sharp jolt, and *she was* back in reality. The Doctor was holding her hand, looking wary. 'Did I startle you?'

His words tingled through her brain as she shook away her

disorientation.

`Sorry, I was distracted.'

`So I see,' said the Doctor, scowling as a woman behind him made

hushing sounds.

Ìs it like the TARDIS scanner?' whispered Charley. The woman once

again hissed in distaste at the disturbance.

Àfter a fashion,' said the Doctor, sounding unsure.

Aristede teetered along a walkway in front of the planet's vista, a stick figure against a mass of sliding clouds. 'Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the planet Venus!' He bowed with surprising grace, and the room rang

with the sound of clapping.

`So that's his artwork?' frowned Charley. 'Like some sort of moving

painting?'

The Doctor's brow furrowed and he shook his head. 'No, I don't think

so. I think it is the planet.'

`He's created a planet?'

`Maybe. It's as likely a possibility that we'd be standing in a spaceship

made of wood, en route to viewing it.'

`We're on a spaceship?' she looked sceptical.

Ùnusual decor, but, yes — that little display proves it. Definitely

a spaceship.'

Ìs that a good or a bad thing?' By now he was far too lost in his thoughts

to give her a clue either way.

Ì don't know. Which is why you and I should go and say hello.'

His speech completed, Aristede had descended to the floor to join his

guests. Thankfully most of them seemed too awestruck to approach,

keeping a respectful distance from their host. The ersatz window cast a

sickly hue across the gathering, as the approaching Venus made her presence felt. The Doctor and Charley watched from a short distance, waiting to make their move.

`We don't seem to be having much luck making friends,' she said glumly.

Ìt'll be fine — I'll find the right moment to subtly join their conversation.'

Sidling up to eavesdrop, the Doctor waited patiently for his cue.

Ànd so,' growled Aristede to his companions, 'my exhibition of '62 was disbanded for the war effort and —'

`Good grief!' the Doctor gasped.

Charley cringed in embarrassment. Aristede and his entourage turned their heads in confusion and observed the Doctor. With incredulous looks, they looked him up and down, before turning away with distaste.

Èvery last item harvested for parts,' continued Aristede sadly.

Àmazing!'

`Doctor!' growled Charley, becoming aware of the circle of curious eavesdroppers forming around then.

`Charley, the floor is moving!' he exclaimed, hopping from foot to foot in excitement.

Òf course the floor is moving, sir,' replied Aristede tersely, turning to face the Doctor.

`Good heavens!' Charley dropped her glass in shock. 'It is moving'

`No,' squealed the Doctor gleefully, 'breathing! The floor is breathing!'

`Naturally,' said Aristede, almost making it seem natural.

Ìt's wonderful! Tell me, how?'

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Aristede scowled at Charley, as if asking her to explain the Doctor's

disarming enthusiasm. She was still preoccupied with tip-toeing

uncomfortably, wary ofwhere to put her feet, but managed a feeble smile.

'Have you suffered a blow to the head, sir?'

'Humour him,' mouthed Charley.

'The creature should die if it didn't breath. Does that not make sense?'

The whites of his eyes distorted grotesquely through the lenses,

punctuating his rhetoric.

'Of course, it's alive!' The Doctor grabbed Charley in a whirlwind of

enthusiasm. 'Isn't that wonderful, Charley? This room... everything

around us is alive!'

'Oh. Great,' said Charley lamely.

'It must measure miles across!'

'Indeed it does sir, specially bred for our mission,'

'Must have been a huge petri dish,' laughed the Doctor.

The corners of Aristede's mouth lifted slightly, but his eyes remained

stern.

'We're standing inside a creature?' asked Charley, looking queasy.

'Our craft and our host,' said Aristede impressively.

'Amazing! A giant creature swimming through space — what bliss!' The

Doctor danced a little jig of excitement and laughed again.

'The belly of the beast, sir!' chimed in Aristede.

'Quite so! That explains your red forest, Charley — capillaries and veins!

I can't believe I didn't realise sooner.'

'Your sickness shows in your disorientation, sir.' Aristede still looked

cautious, but seemed now satisfied that this babbling fop was harmless.

After all, an audience was an audience.

'Nobody's perfect,' the Doctor shrugged. `So, how's that done?' He

pointed at the square window Venus peered through.

'One of our cruder adaptations, but effective nonetheless. Merely our

boat's optic nerve diverted from its path.'

The Doctor nodded like an eager student. 'And the creature's drive?

Brain control?'

'Quite right sir. You seem to be regaining your senses.'

'I misplace things all the time.'

Aristede proffered his carved ivory walking cane: 'The beast's tooth!' He smiled proudly. 'Well, a modest part of one.' The Doctor smiled politely, but did not accept the object.

Charley felt distinctly seasick. Much as the thrill of adventure seemed

appealing in principle, the rush of this discovery was proving to be

something of a culture shock.

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`Doctor, this is absurd,' she began.

`Superbly so,' he agreed.

`Plain silly,' she added.

Àbsurd? Yes... Silly? No! It makes perfect sense. Think of it — a trip to

Venus. This visit will bring these people into contact with temperatures

hot enough to melt lead, crippling pressure, clouds of acid. That's not

a problem for technology to fix — let nature solve it.

`But it's preposterous,' scoffed Charley. 'How can any animal survive all

that heat and pressure?'

Ànd acid,' he reminded her.

`That too!'

`Life finds a way,' answered the Doctor, with total faith.

Ànd it doesn't mind being... being infested?'

`Think of yourself as a well-behaved flea,' whispered the Doctor

conspiratorially, enjoying her stunned response. 'An itch here, a scratch

there, but otherwise it hasn't got a clue we're aboard.'

Charley looked around her shoulder gingerly, suddenly aware of how

rhythmic the breeze against her skin was. Breathing in, breathing out. The

Doctor seemed to view her apprehension with positive delight, and

every

time she tried to return his smile, her expression set like concrete.

Ànd it's safe?'

`Probably.'

Ànd just suppose it happens to open its mouth unexpectedly?'

The Doctor casually tapped his fmgertips together. 'Well, I suppose

we'd be sucked out,' he answered cheerily.

`Sucked out?'

He nodded with pantomime concern. 'Let's hope you don't make it

ticklish.' And letting a snort of laughter escape, he scampered off in a blur of velvet.

`My jester will sit beside me,' announced Aristede, tapping a chair at the

head of the table.

The Doctor accepted the invitation graciously, as he still had

unanswered questions. Charley sat beside him, unsure of the Doctor's

newfound favour with the old man. With remarkable speed, the servants

had arranged a long snaking table for a meal, large enough to seat

everyone who had gathered. The people bustled to find their seats, while

all the time, glowing from its window, the grey curve ofVenus tilted down

towards them. Aristede stood at the head of the gathering, as the long line

of eager faces twisted uncomfortably to watch him.

`Tonight Venus shall surrender her secrets,' he croaked. 'Sounds and

smells and colours that no man before could chance upon and live.

Goddess Venus shall speak to those of us gathered here tonight.' A young **man** at the front of the table shifted awkwardly. Aristede turned his head 1 **and fixed him with his unblinking stare. 'Through her voice, we shall**

experience that which no man or woman has ever experienced before. A

blissful split second **of utter enlightenment,' he paused and took in a deep breath,** savouring **his contrived anticipation. 'And then peace!' He spread his arms triumphantly as rapturous applause rang around the room.**

Charley and the Doctor were the only ones not to clap.

`What does he mean?' said Charley urgently.

The Doctor shushed her impatiently, raising his voice to address

Aristede. 'We've not discussed your exhibit, Aristede.' The Doctor held his butter knife in his hands, flipping it back and forth as he spoke. Charley sensed the arch lilt in his voice.

`My jester **speaks,' said the old man, managing a hacking laugh. 'My exhibit is a journey into the greatest canvas the Solar System has to offer,'**

her replied grandly.

'So you said,' agreed the Doctor, tucking a napkin into his collar

casually. 'But what use is a canvas with nothing painted on it?'

`Your logic is impeccable, Doctor, even if your memory fails you,' said

Aristede quietly checking his pocket watch. 'Much like the production of

our cooperative friend,' he gestured to the room around them knowingly,

'in my old age, I prefer to leave the execution to my employees.'

He leaned back in his chair and watched the surface of Venus keenly.

The first spark of light reflected in the Doctor's sad grey eyes. A pinprick of energy cracked through the placid cloud layers of the planet, allowing

*thin streak ofdarkness to burst through, smearing across its surface like a tear tracing down a cheek. The Doctor looked away as a second

disturbance broke through.

The audience predictably applauded again.

`Doctor, what are they?' asked Charley, though she already knew the

answer. A childhood of cinema newsreels played through in her head in a split second — some things never changed that much. She knew a bomb when she saw one.

`Bombs,' confirmed Aristede proudly.

`Yes, bombs,' scowled the Doctor. 'Crude bombs, scrawling their debris

across the planet's surface. So that's your great achievement, Aristede?'

The Doctor's glare was as cold as his voice. 'It doesn't seem very

accomplished to me.'

Èngineered storms that will rage across the planet's surface for a

thousand years! For so long I dreamed of a canvas worthy of my designs.'

Or your ego?'

`You have a sharp tongue for an invited guest, sir.'

Ìsn't that the problem with art, though? Everyone's a critic.'

Aristede held his arms wide to the crowd, clearly relishing playing to an

audience. 'What does any artist attempt to do, but mark their place in time

and space? To endure, to last! Think of it — we shall step into the biggest

artwork in history, painted on the biggest canvas!'

`Perhaps you could detonate a sponsor's message as well?' suggested

the Doctor innocently.

`You are quite the wit, my little jester,' said Aristede, his bitter tone

making it clear that he thought nothing of the sort. 'In my humble

opinion — though I concede that very little about me is humble — my little

exhibit is a victimless crime.'

`Which brings me neatly to my next question,' replied the Doctor, his

outrage suddenly replaced with calm and reason. 'You said that we'd step

into the canvas, so I assume that your little jaunt isn't a drive-by?'

'

The old man frowned. 'Your words are so strange, Doctor. Some would

say the ramblings of a madman, though clearly you are not.' His eyes

narrowed to slits as he toyed with the idea. 'We will step into the canvas

and begin our new lives.'

`You might be able to engineer a beast of burden to make your journey

for you, but it'll never survive flying into the eye of your storms.'

`That does not concern me.'

Ìt should! Many have tried before you, and all were lured to their

deaths,' the Doctor warned sharply.

Aristede sneered. 'They were mistaken. Venus is a planet of the dead.

The living have no business there. But we are different. Life is doomed by

Venus' guiles, but in death we will be triumphant. In death we will

conquer, spreading our mark across the planet for centuries to come.'

Ìn death?' the Doctor asked urgently.

`But of course,' wheedled Aristede. 'My final work.'

it

`You're going to crash the ship?' The Doctor jumped to his feet, his

palms pounding on the wooden table as he leaned forward. Aristede looked confused, unsure if this was a question.

`The exhibit,' he agreed.

Closer than ever, the first violent black slash across Venus' surface seemed to have twisted itself into a sinister smile. The Doctor gave Aristede a pitying look and raised his voice to the crowd, which now rippled with sounds of concern.

Ì want you to listen,' he commanded. 'I can save you all — I have a ship onboard and I can ferry you to safety.'

Silence.

Charley looked at the Doctor, urging him to do something.

`Don't you understand? This is a suicide mission!'

The final words faded in his throat when he saw the response. There

was a brief awkward silence, before the group politely ignored him.

Not to be beaten, the Doctor repeated himself. 'I said, this is a suicide mission.'

The *same response.*

`Well, don't you care?' cried Charley, leaping to his defence. 'Do you want to die?'

An elegant figure midway along the table stood up. A woman wrapped in a patterned shawl with a flash of white running through her auburn hair. 'Of course we want to die,' she said reasonably, in a kind voice. `That's why we're here.'

Charley looked around her and turned to the Doctor, his expression frozen in brittle shock. 'I'm beginning to understand,' he whispered.

Charley saw the cloud of sadness that crossed his features and instantly

felt like she was sinking. She twisted in agitation, as thoughts danced through her head in panic. The red-haired woman fixed Charley with a maternal smile. 'Come sit with us, child and join our meal. We're united

by the plague.'

The Doctor's eyes widened. 'The one thing you all have in common.'

Charley backed away instinctively. 'Plague?'

The Doctor shook his head slightly to reassure her. 'It's fine, Charley —

long after your time. They called it a plague, but it wasn't really. Nothing more than an evolutionary dead end, ticking away, waiting to strike.'

Ànd that's why they were all chosen,' said Charley, her voice cracking.

`People who wouldn't care that this was a one-way trip.'

The Doctor placed his arms behind his back and looked up at the

planet's pock-marked surface, while addressing the crowd. 'And so rather

than wait for death to come, you all decided to pay her a visit and make

your mark.'

The sour man in the tweed jacket from the reception leaned forward and

coughed gruffly. 'If there's a chance to see something no other man can

see, then it's worth it,' he said, with visible restraint. A few people around him nodded defiantly.

`You're willing to die for the hope of seeing a single image?' Charley

scanned the faces in disbelief, vainly looking for a hint of empathy.

Aristede sat low in his chair, his bottom lip trembling as he searched for

words. 'The hope of doing something no one else has ever done before.

There are people who would *give* anything to be here.'

`These people have,' said the Doctor sadly. 'I hope they did it for

something better than your reputation.'

À worthy bargain to see the most beautiful image in the Solar System,'

rasped Aristede, his eyes widening behind the lenses of his pince-nez.

À price these people are willing to pay?' He turned to the crowd

indignantly. 'Well, are you?' he demanded.

Ì want to go,' said a meek voice finally. It was the boy Charley had seen

in the forest, still staring his sad stare.

`So do I!' said another voice.

Aristede nodded piously to his supporters, before turning to the Doctor.

Finally though, the gloating look of triumph was gone from his face.

Tut isn't there more for you all?' said Charley.

Ìt's more than I've ever done,' said a familiar timid voice. Charley looked down at Scarlet through watery eyes and realised that she was defeated. The Doctor cut in and spared her the scrutiny of the onlookers.

`So you all gave up everything to be here?'

Aristede held his head up proudly. 'We renounce our names, our pasts and our home.'

`For a dead world?' urged the Doctor.

`We are the dead. This is our planet, Doctor, and we claim it as our own.'

The Doctor was silent. He looked over Aristede's shoulder where the ***membrane*** showed Venus' glowing mass, staring balefully over them like an unblinking eye.

The Doctor took a deep breath, removed the napkin from his collar, leaving it neatly folded on the table. Finally, he stepped forward and shook the old man's hand firmly.

`Then claim it.'

Aristede nodded slightly, resting his hands on top of his cane. Charley frowned in disbelief. 'Doctor?'

The Doctor's stillness felt like a betrayal. He looked down. She sniffed slightly and fought back the stinging of the tears in her eyes. The

Doctor

tried to place his hand on her shoulder to comfort her, but seemed unable

to do so.

Charley looked sullenly at Scarlet, who suddenly seemed to look paper-

thin beneath her gaudy outfit.

`You'll never arrive,' she said finally.

`We might.'

Charley stared at her more urgently. 'But you'll never see the planet's

surface! You'll never see anything.'

The colour seemed to fade from Scarlet. Tut I might,' she said blankly.

Charley opened her mouth, but no words came. A roomful of sad faces

looked at her — some with confusion, some with pity. She felt the gentle

grasp of the Doctor's hand closing around her shoulder as he led her away and the crowd parted silently to let them pass.

Hours later, they were sat in the nook of one of the trees, legs dangling over the edge as they watched the mass of expectant people waiting

silently below. In a few short hours the journey would be over, and uneasy stillness had replaced the gentle wash of chatter. An unseen baby cried its low cry, before being quickly cooed back to silence.

`So that's it?' Charley asked finally.

`Yes,' the Doctor replied, without looking at her.

Ì keep trying, but I just don't understand.'

He nodded slowly, turned to look at her and gestured ahead. Now closer

than before, the planet's surface suddenly seemed alive. Charley's eyes

widened, as huge dark stormy spots erupted through the smooth

yellowing horizon like ink on blotting paper. The light danced across her face as she tried to speak. The Doctor gave her a broad smile.

`Blots on the landscape,' she whispered to herself. The Doctor shot her

a quizzical look. 'It looks like a piece of blotting paper,' she said, smiling as she considered the notion.

Èach of those blots is a storm a thousand miles across,' he whispered

with typical understatement. 'Do you see the ripples?'

She frowned slightly, watching as dirty grey waves of disturbance

rippled silently across the surface like raindrops on the surface ofa pond.

And then she saw the pinprick of shadow their vessel cast upon the planet.

Ìt is beautiful,' she admitted.

Èven the most obscene acts can produce something beautiful,' he

nodded. 'Now do you see?'

`No, I don't.'

`Would you ever see this sight on a sheet of blotting paper?'

She shook *her* head sullenly, watching the seeping rivers of black painting veins across Venus' perfect marbled surface.

She turned to face him and managed a businesslike, clipped smile. 'No.

I wouldn't.'

`The human urge to explore is a remarkable thing, Charley. For most

creatures time moves so slowly that it's barely a breeze. Yet humans cling onto it like a kite in a gale and don't let go!' His eyes grew wider: 'Land, oceans... *heavens!* You understand that there's always more to see, more to do.'

`Do we?'

He placed a hand on her shoulder. 'That's what you did.'

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She looked down. That was a long time ago now—a personal dare that had changed everything in a few short hours. Sneaking out to drink, discovering a surprising flair for card games, stealing a uniform before stowing away on that massive airship where she first met the Doctor... She remembered the pounding of her adrenalin, the thrill of those split-second decisions sparking off around her *like* firecrackers, and of not wanting that night to ever end. Perhaps it never had? Maybe not the adventure she expected, but definitely the one she would have chosen.

Ìt was worth it,' she beamed.

`Good,' said the Doctor, hopping down from his perch to the ground, before offering a hand to help Charley down.

Às she landed with a thud, she looked at the crowd, the figures now cowering shadows against the planet's tumbling storm clouds.

`Do you think they'll find what they're looking for?'

`How so?'

Charley shrugged sadly: 'Myths of men lured to leave their homes by

a living planet – all magic and mystery. But it's all just chemicals and

rocks.'

`There are worse things to believe in.'

`But it's not real.'

`That's why Venus isn't a lure, Charley. A place of myth, legends and

beguiling mystery undoubtedly, but these people are drawn by nothing

more sinister than curiosity.' He levelled his gaze at her and smiled a

private smile. She turned away and they began to walk back towards the

TARDIS.

`Satiable curiosity?'

The Doctor took her hand: `Do you think you'll ever stop dreaming?'

At last, that answer seemed enough. Holding hands, off they walked to

the familiar blue box, nestled in the shade of the red orchard, ready for

a new adventure.

38

Earth

Jim Mortimore

An Adventure of the Fourth *Doctor*

It wasn't entirely an animal. Nor — quite — was it completely *a machine.*

It hunched on a plain of *black glass beneath* a dully shining, blotched *red globe* which *covered three quarters of the* sky. A human *being* from *the* twentieth century might *have recognised the creature as an* ant, though they certainly wouldn't *have recognised the cool, bloated* orb which *the* hot yellow sun of the twentieth century had *swelled over time*

inconceivable to become.

But then, strictly speaking, human *beings hadn't walked* the Earth *for* quite some while.

The ant remained still, waiting, its skin glistening *in the* sunlight. Its mind did **not** *function in any way* a human *being* from *the* twentieth century *would have recognised or understood. There were no emotions here. No fear, no awe,* no curiosity, **no love.** Its historical and *ecological context were so peripheral as* to *be meaningless.*

Of more importance *were its immediate* surroundings. The ant studied them, minutely, exactingly, comparing old *data* to *new.* Folds and cracks in the black *glass* **were** *measured* with *laser* accuracy; prismatic reflections from *time-softened edges* **revealing** *subtle, often hidden geometries.* The contrast *level between the ground and* **the** *sky was recorded and compared* with *previous data. Molecules adrift in the thin* **air** *were captured, analysed, interpreted.*

The ant — *not* quite an animal, nor quite a machine — could not *feel. The concept* **((intuition** *was as alien* to it as *the endless,* unbroken black of space. And yet it could formulate theories. Pose questions. In some peculiar, mechanical, dimly understood **way** it could *be* puzzled.

Something *was wrong* with the landscape.

I bust the door down and ankled it.

Outside the blue wooden box still looked like a cupboard. I didn't even

bother to figure out the trick interior, just lit out on the lam. All I needed to know was what was written on the outside: POLICE. Not that the big

Zoot that pinched me was a bull. Pinko maybe. Or maybe he was a dick.

I didn't know from nothin' and I wasn't about to dolly up and ask.

I just ran.

The Zoot followed — surprise! — wing-tipped shoes, rube's hat,

a breakneck scarf and shoulders padded like a lunatic's cell. He was

blgger'n me so pretty soon I felt that two-finger pinch all over again. Or maybe it was just the air. Couldn't seem to catch my breath all of a sudden.

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The Zoot picked me up and turned me round. I groped for my pocket, the

switchblade I kept there for luck. My jacket had ridden up under my arms

and I couldn't reach. I dangled. You tell me — could I do anything else?

The Zoot stared at me solemnly. I groped in my top pocket for some

gum. The packet was empty. `Ya gotta stick?' Should I give lessons on how

to stay hip?

The Zoot looked at me strangely. 'I'm sure your mother will die a death

ofworry ifyou're not back for supper.'

Òfay, you're off your nuts. My mother planted herself a year ago last

Tuesday. On a toot until the day she ossified. Sarge said if the Man hadn't

already done it, he coulda turned prohibition on its head with the juice

they wrung from her liver.'

`My deepest condolences.'

`You what?' I aimed a kick at the Zoot's knee. 'Talk English willya? We

talk English on this planet.'

Eyes like marbles, the Zoot glanced around: black glass for ground;

cloudy red sun that near-filled the sky. Like something from outta comic

book. 'English?' He shook his head slowly. 'I have my doubts.'

The big dewdropper's expression softened. He resembled a flapper's

poodle. But something about him didn't ring. He put me down. His

mistake. Like I could give a bean what planet we were on. Outta here was

outta *here,* you hip?

`Gotta iron my shoelaces.'

I made all of fifty feet. He was in front of me. This time I hadn't *even* heard him move. I took a fall trying to switch directions. His hand

flickered, a genuine dime store rattler. I didn't hit the ground.

`Don't cast a kitten. I ain't going no-where.'

His voice boomed. 'It's the air. I'm afraid you can't breathe it. Not

unless you want to... sleep with the fishes.'

`Sleep with the...?' I barked. Òfay, I *said* we speak English. Anyway says you. I'm breathin' ain't I?'

`Your lungs are expanding and contracting. It feels like breathing. But

what's going in is not good for you. You need an adapter. A piggyback

molecule. Something to facilitate oxygen exchange across the

semipermeable membranes. That headache you have, and those pains in

your chest: right now you're suffocating slowly.'

`So's your old man.' But it was true. I *was* feeling half seas over.

I remembered Mom and her bottles of coffin varnish. I didn't want to go

out like that. Not me. Not ever.

`You spinnin' me a line?'

`Ten minutes from now you'll be dead. Unless...' He held out his hand.

There was a doohicky like a sticking plaster on it. 'Put this on your neck.

Here. Adjacent to the carotid artery. It's self-adhesive. You won't need to

hold it.'

I took the thing and wiggled it. Shrugged. Slapped it against my neck. It

prickled for a minute, like sunburn, then the pain in my chest and head

went away.

`Ducky!'

`How do you feel?'

I took a breath, then another. 'Everything's Jake.'

I touched the patch. It felt like my skin. I felt like I could run a mile and push weights for dessert. 'Whatever that is, it's a real lollapalooza. If you wanna make a killin' I know a guy who knows a guy.'

Ì' m sure you do.' A grin that showed no sign of stopping anytime soon

spread across the big Zoot's face.

`Now that we're friends perhaps you'd like to tell me your name.'

He held out his hand.

I looked at it. 'You a fag?' I shook my head. `Nah. You're no Ethel. Not

a baby grand like you. Tell me your name ' The patch stuck to my neck felt just like skin now. I gave up trying to find the edges, instead let my hand

fall back to my side, then stuck it in my pocket for safe-keeping. The switchblade was a comforting weight. 'Then again, maybe I'll just **take**

a guess. You're a Quack, ain'cha?'

Blowed if the big Zoot didn't doff his hat. 'The singular article, you

might say.' He added, 'At your service.'

I turned away on the pretence of looking around, and hitched my pants.

The string was getting loose again. 'It's all glass. An army of dead

soldiers.'

His voice boomed, gently. 'We speak English on this planet.'

I barked.

`Dead soldiers. Beer bottles. All melted down like slag.'

I could feel the big Zoot's grin stickin' in my back like some torpedo's

shiv. I turned, arming my best shot, and he was just standing there,

hand out, holding a belt.

I shut up.

He waited.

I took the belt.

I mean, what else was I gonna do? Bad enough a fella's trousers fall

down on his own planet.

Ì got no scratch.'

`Money always costs too much. A dear friend of mine once said anyone

who lives within their means suffers from a lack of imagination.'

41

My fist curled around the belt. In my pocket, the mother-of-pearl

switchblade handle was hot to the touch. 'You calling me some kind of

egg now? A high hat with a buncha heavy sugar?'

The Zoot blinked. 'Actually it was a compliment.'

I barked: a short, contemptuous laugh. 'You can keep your apple sauce.'

Às it happens I prefer horseradish.'

I waved the belt. 'So what, this is mine now? You just giving it to me?

A two dollar belt? And you're just handing it over like that? You don't even know my name. You sure you're not an Ethel?'

Èthel, no. Doctor, yes.'

Àll right. Just so we're clear.'

Às a dead soldier's two-fingered brother.'

`That's real funny.'

`Put the belt on.'

I frowned. 'Don't get in a lather.' I put the belt on.

`Keep the string. You never know when you might need a good piece of

string.'

I coiled the string and shoved it in my pocket. The other one from the

switchblade. It snuggled up to the bottle of perfume I'd lifted an hour

before. 'Let's ankle.'

Ìf you mean take a look around, that's my entire modus operandi.'

`Though I gotta say there ain't a lot to cop is there?'

`Not here. Still, it's a big world. Relatively speaking.'

The Zoot turned and strode away across the slick ground. I ran to keep

up, stumbling often on the sharp, curved ridges. Hobnails ain't the best

way to walk on glass.

`What happened here anyway? Why is it all glass like this?'

Òh... vulcanism, nuclear holocaust, solar flares. The usual heady

cocktail.'

I sighed impatiently. 'Always puttin' on the Ritz, ain'cha?'

The Zoot slammed to a halt, turned and glared at me.

`Boy-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless, do you know what a Crème Brulee

is?'

I walked past without stopping. Face, see? 'Some kinda fag-speak?'

The Zoot turned again, now walking in my footsteps. 'As a matter of fact

they serve them in the Ritz. The Creme Brulee is a sweet confection of

blended cream and egg yolk, flavoured with vanilla, almonds or bitter

chocolate and covered in brown sugar which is melted to a glassy slag at

quite insane temperatures with a plumber's blowtorch.' He shrugged,

adding casually, 'They're all the rage in Paris.'

`Yeah, so?'

42

The Zoot gestured with an outflung scarf-end at the glassy landscape.

`Welcome to the world's largest Creme Bralee.'

The Zoot strode past me again.

I chewed it over. Something about this guy gave me the shakes. 'Are

there any people?'

Ànyone to steal from, you mean?' I ducked as a length of scarf flew

backwards, wrapping a few more turns around the Zoot's neck. 'We-ell...

that really rather depends on how you define *people,* doesn't it?'

'Fella's gotta put bread on the table.' My cheeks flamed. 'For the Sheba,

you know what I'm saying?'

'Is that who you stole the perfume for? Your girlfriend?'

I scowled. 'Where are we anyway?'

`The same place we were. New York. The Big Apple.'

I laughed out loud. 'You're all wet. This ain't NY. This is some other

place. Another planet, right? Like the magazines. Amazing Stories.'

He looked at me strangely. 'You can read?'

I jerked a thumb back in the direction we'd come from. 'Police Public

Call Box.'

The Zoot chuckled. 'No wonder you ran away.'

`Yeah, whatever.'

'So... about these magazines?'

'Central Library has back issues. Ripped some college fish there last fall.

Silver lighter. Sweet. Had to wiggle some to beat the fuzz though.'

I rubbed a hand across my face. 'Fed us, me and Mom, for a week, that lighter.'

The Zoot seemed to think that over. 'You can't beat a good pulp. What

did you think of the stories?'

'How'd'ya know I even read 'em?'

'Oh... young people, enquiring minds... it seemed a safe bet.'

'Yeah, well, they're okay. The pictures help some.'

'Be glad you're not living in the twenty-second century. Education for

the proletariat is compulsorily underfunded... I've seen places where students sell organs on the black market to fund their education.' His

voice darkened again. 'And that's just 0 levels,' he added, disapprovingly.

'**And** not always their own organs.'

'Ofay, you talk like the Joes in those magazine stories. Anyway. This

can't be the same place we were. Where are all the buildings? The Statue **of** Liberty? The Empire State? Where's the district? The Club-House? The **rats?** The fish? The flappers? Where's *New* York?'

'We-ell... that would depend on what time it is.'

The Zoot's voice, though soft, continued to grow more dangerous.

I knew a guy ran a gin mill sounded like that. You didn't wanna mess with

him. No way. He'd buddy up like he was your best friend ever, then grind

a mitt full of broken glass in your ear just to remind ya he wasn't.

I sneaked a look at Mom's watch. Chased silver. Worth a bale. I ripped

it back from the piker she pawned it to. The money she got for that watch

killed her so I mixed the guy who bought it a molotov. Now he's broke and

homeless. Touch sunburned too by all accounts. 'It's... I turned the watch,

studied the dials carefully. 'Quarter of 12.'

The Zoot sighed.

`What, you think I'm stupid now?'

The Zoot muttered something under his breath. It sounded like, 'Two

epochs divided by a common language.'

`Yeah, an' a pox on you too.' I mumbled back.

In a louder voice, the Zoot added, 'I said this was the same place. I didn't say it was the same time.'

Just like that I got it. He was talkin' about seasons. Fall, Summer. Not

what *time* it was. What *year*.

I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

Àh,' said the Zoot, beaming. 'Music hath charms to soothe the savage

beast. But silence,' he added with dark humour. 'Is definitely golden.'

Àll right.' I put away the watch feeling like a sap. 'Say I believe you.'

I chewed it over. 'How long? I mean — how long has it been from where we

were... until now.'

Òh, not all that long, relatively speaking. I should say around three or four times the age of the known universe when you come from.' He held out a thumb, artist-style, to measure the width of the sun, then counted briefly on his fingers. 'Say around fifty million years.'

Now I knew he was feeding me a line. If there's one thing I hate it's a liar.

`What am I some kinda dumb Dora? Tell it to Sweeney!' I was shaking.

`What are you, hopped up? Sure you are. Look at those eyes. Don't futz with me pal. I'm warning ya. I may look like a kid but I been around the block, ya know? Ya futzin' Milquetoast.'

In my pocket, my hand closed around a mother-of-pearl handle. My thumb rested with practised ease on a sprung steel nub.

Ì can prove it.'

`What am I, a rube now? Quit beatin' ya gums '

`Look behind you.'

Òh, I'm gonna do that all right.'

I took out the switch. Squeezed the nub. The blade flicked out, oiled, deadly.

Ì told you. I'm no kid.'

Ì believe you.'

Something in the Zoot's voice made me hesitate. A sound came from

behind. Like an ice pick at the fish market. Crunch. I turned round.

Crunch... *crunchcrunch.*

`Hell —' I breathed.

It was an ant.

I blinked stupidly.

A rusty metal ant as big as a baker's truck, no — four bakers' trucks,

towering over me.

An Ant-machine.

I glanced from my tiny, lightly oiled switchblade to a pair of huge,

jagged, grease-scummed mandibles, each serrated blade as long as the

Zoot was tall.

flaming holy rollers!' I finished.

And the monster lunged forward, legs slashing at the ground like ice

picks, spraying razor sharp glass chips at every step, its black, scummy,

serrated mandibles aimed right at my head.

`Mooch it!'

I tore past the Zoot, hobnails clacking on the glassy ground like a line of

floorflushers in dancehall pumps. Loud and fast as I was, the Ant-

machine was louder and faster. It's legs were spiked, like enormous shivs,

and they slammed into the ground as if the thing that owned them

weighed tons. I saw a guy after a breezer rolled over him once. **There**

weren't much left of the car, but the guy was just plumb not there. This

creature had to weigh about a hundred times what that breezer weighed.

Òfay, you comin'?'

I don't know why I turned to scream back at the Zoot. Something about

that big dumb bimbo struck me like a kitten. I ain't normally the carin'

type. Anyways, I turned around. More fool me, I guess.

The Zoot hadn't moved. The Ant-machine bore down on him like the

great screeching rusty pile of metal it was, six legs working so fast they **were a** blur, mandibles grinding, antennae humming like wires in a wind, scummed belly obscured by a fine mist of glass chips.

The Zoot took a single step to one side, sank to the ground and sat

cross-legged.

He pulled his hat down across his face and reeled in his enormous scarf.

The Ant-machine didn't even notice he was there. It ran over him like

a steelyard freight. I think the nearest leg actually brushed his knee.

Another dug a hole in the ground where his scarf had been seconds

before. Then he was gone, lost in a fog of fine glass chips.

The Ant-machine kept coming. Right towards me.

Time to make like a tree.

`Don't move.' The Zoot's voice rolled out of the foggy cloud like the first

storm of summer. As if I was going to pay any attention to it. 'I said don't *move!'*

For some reason I stopped. The Ant-machine circled me rapidly,

blocking my way. But then it stopped too. Fist locked around

a switchblade I would never respect again, I turned to one side. The Ant-

machine turned too. Once again my path was blocked. I backtracked. The

Ant-machine followed. But not running, just pacing me now. Still backing

away, I bumped into something large and solid.

`Pheromones.'

The Zoot, brushing glass powder from his padded shoulders with the

brim of his hat.

`Bushwar

Ìt can smell you.' His voice was a dark whisper.

Òfay, I washed yesterday.'

`Not that kind of smell.'

The Ant-machine stopped a short distance from us. Its great black head

tilted, antennae moving like fine wires. I could hear gears whirring and

screeching, unoiled, somewhere inside.

`What other kind is there?'

The Zoot wiped a fingertip across my neck. A drop of sweat clung there.

`Hey, go chase yourself!'

The Zoot wiggled his finger towards the Ant-machine. 'A pheromone is

a substance secreted by an individual and perceived by a second individual

generally, but not always, of the same species...' The Zoot moved to the

left. The Ant-machine ignored him. He wiped his finger across the end of

his scarf and, keeping a firm grip on one end, flung it a short distance

towards the Ant. The machine reacted, moving suddenly towards the

scarf. 'Which produces a specific reaction in the percipient.' The Zoot

yanked the scarf away out of range. The Ant-machine waved its antennae

for a moment before returning its attention to me.

`Now shut up and let me think.'

I shot a sideways glance at the Zoot.

Ànd put that sausage stick away.'

`You don't think I can use it?'

The Zoot gestured at the Ant-machine. 'Judging by my estimate of the

resistance of common glass to the application of pinpoint pressure at one

gravity I would say that thing weighs at least eighty tons. You might be

able to scrape a little rust off it, but I hardly imagine you'll achieve

anything more. Besides,' he added in a lighter tone, 'it would be a shame

to ruin such a finely crafted piece. It might be worth thousands as a family heirloom to your great, great, great, great, great, great grandchildren.'

`Thousands?'

A thought struck me.

`Children?'

Crunch.

The Ant-machine moved towards me. Glass chips spat at each step. Its

belly was scarred as if it had *been* rubbed with wire wool. It stank like **a** machine shop. Somewhere inside gears clashed.

I backed up.

The Ant followed.

The Zoot said, 'Whatever you do, don't run. Don't provoke it. Just go

where it wants you to go.'

`That's all right for you to say! What's it doing anyway?'

`Herding you.'

`Step off the board! Why ain't it herding you?'

`We-ell, I did use soap this morning.' There was no humour in the

Zoot's voice.

Ìt can't smell you?'

Òh, it can smell me. It just doesn't recognise me. It has no response

pattern for me so as long as I'm not a threat it'll ignore me.'

`Ducky.' The situation was clearly anything but. `So what now — we just

go where this bug-eyed Betty wants us to — hey!'

The great black head dipped suddenly. Mandibles sprang open and

clanged shut around my waist.

`Get it off! Get it off!'

I rammed my switchblade against the thing's hide. It bounced. I felt my

ribs creak, then the pressure eased off.

The machine had picked me up. It lifted me, ten, 15, twenty feet above

the ground.

The Zoot's voice came from somewhere behind me.

`Whatever you do don't ***let go!'***

As if.

I heard the sound of clambering from behind, strained my head round

to see.

The Zoot had grabbed a leg as the Ant-machine churned past. Now he

used the pistoning movement to propel himself onto the broad back. He **sat** there, astride the metal body, hand jammed on his hat to stop it **blowing** away.

What'd I do?'

Ìt's what you didn't do. You weren't going fast enough for its liking.

Your behaviour provoked a new response.'

`Where's it taking us?'

`Where's it taking you, you mean.' The big Zoot was grinning fit to bust

a barrel. 'I'm just along for the ride!'

The Ant-machine picked up speed.

`This breezer really hits on all sixes!'

The Zoot waved a cheery reply.

After an hour or so on the lam my panic had began to subside. Wherever

we were going it wasn't anywhere nearby. But I knew other Ant-machines

had travelled the same route because the ground was pitted with the

imprints of their pistoning legs.

The ground rose steadily around us until we were moving along

a ravine. The faces to either side were smooth, unblemished, like frozen

waves, the *glass* of seemingly infinite depth. From time to time I caught a glimpse of shapes in there. Things that looked like cones with great metal

spheres perched on them receded into the distance; other things that

looked like aeroplanes without wings, clogging spiral ramps and bridges

that swept away into the foggy depths. Dull red sunlight, streaked and

blotched with shadows, occasionally penetrated the cliffs of glass,

reflecting from this cone or that sphere or ramp. It looked like hell in

there. As the light fell and shifted so structures emerged briefly from the

gloom. Windows. Doorways. Cars. I was looking at a city. A city

a hundred, a thousand times the size of New York. Once it must have

blazed with light. Now it was dark. Just shadows. I shivered.

The Zoot saw the shadows too, and his face assumed a solemn

expression. He doffed his hat, as I'd seen people do at funerals.

The Ant-machine raced on.

After another hour the Ant curved away from the cliffs of glass and the

trail became more uneven. As the dead city fell away behind us, the

ground became more thickly pitted with holes so that now it resembled

a muddy track churned in the rain.

And there was a noise. It rose above the clank and whirr of the Ant-

machine, filling the air, a kind of deep lowing, or hooting. With it came

a smell, like a house full of cats that had never been cleaned.

The glassy ground in front ofthe Ant-machine fell steeply away to reveal

a gigantic crater. They say there's a meteorite crater in Arizona as big as

this but I don't know about that. Ain't never been to Arizona. Anyhow this

crater was huge, and choked with fog. The fog rolled in waves so that at

first I thought it was a lake. Trees poked out ofit. But not like any trees you ever saw. Weird, fleshy, flat-topped trees with long, spindly stalks, their leaves black and iridescent, like oil in a puddle, they clustered together in clumps. The hooting noise was coming from deep within the fog, rolling

and echoing around the glassy canyon walls. And the the stench was foul,

a sort of sour-milky smell like new babies.

Under the fog there were lights. Sickly yellow-green lights. They pulsed

slowly on and off, and the fog rippled across them like a tide.

Other Ant-machines were moving up and down the canyon walls, long

streams of them. I could hear their pistons and gears clanking and

screeching distantly.

Our machine joined one such queue. I yelped when it walked head first

straight down the near-vertical crater wall. Above me the Zoot bellowed

with glee. If he hadn't tied himself on with that scarf of his he

undoubtedly would have fallen to his death.

Gripping the glassy wall, the Ant-machine walked down into the fog. At

once the stench intensified but the sounds became more indistinct.

Greasy droplets of moisure clung to my skin. I tried to wipe my face but

the goop just smeared in. I shuddered.

The fog layer turned out to be quite thin, just a few dozen yards or so.

Under it the air was clear again, though much warmer and damp-

smelling. The sickly yellow-green light was brighter here.

In a few moments the fog was above us, and an incredible sight was

revealed before me.

The ground was spongelike, covered in an undulating, fleshy surface,

almost like pink moss. The oily black stalks of trees rose in clumps from the surface, their leaves spreading out to catch the dull light which filtered through the fog-layer.

Strangest of all *were* the animals grazing on the pink moss. Huge, fleshy creatures that moved on all fours, with mottled skin which in some places you could see through. Inside the skin, muscle bunched and

stretched, propelling the creatures slowly across the ground. *Where* the skin was clear tiny sparks pulsed in sluggish yellow-green streams deep

within the flesh. It was from these animals that the soft,

penetrating hoots emerged.

And as the Ant-machine neared ground level I realised just how big

these creatures were. One stood nearly as tall as a two-storey brownstone.

They were much larger than the Ant-machines. They ambled in herds,

gigantic heads scraping the ground, mouths the size of Volkswagens

snuffling across the pink moss, occasionally enveloped in clouds of

spores or pollen their massive, fleshy legs caused to erupt from the

surface as they plodded dully along. There were hundreds of them. Maybe

more. The smell was disgusting.

I craned my neck to look back at the Zoot. He was peering around with

a brass pocket-telescope.

`Magnificent!' I heard him exclaim. 'Evolution in effect, you see? If only

Charles could see this. Life in endless iteration. Positively heart-warming!'

He seemed delighted with himself.

I frowned. Catching the look, he boomed, 'It's an ***ant-meadow.*** Amazing.

When you come from, ants would herd aphids and other insects;

protecting them from predators, keeping them alive as a source of vital

nourishment. Ant-dew. A sweet liquid used to feed the queen. Now here

we are at the other end of time and what do we find?' He flung out both

harms in a sweeping gesture. 'The very same symbiosis! Perhaps the only

example left on the planet! Magnificent!'

`What are these animals?' I shouted back above the hooting noise of the

grazers. 'Cows or something? What do the Ants want from them?'

One answer came almost immediately. Our Ant-machine sidled up to

one of the giant beasts and began to stroke the fleshy hide with its

forelegs. Inside its body a slow stream of light trickled sluggishly. Soon an oily substance began to ooze from cup-sized pores. The Ant-machine

rapidly coated its limbs in this substance. After a moment I realised the

machine was moving more smoothly and quietly.

Ìt's greasing itself.' I had to admit it was fascinating in a disgusting

way. Like seeing what was left of that guy the breezer rolled over. 'Why did it bring us here?'

Almost in answer the Ant-machine opened its mandibles and dropped

me onto the spongy ground. The fleshy, stinking hide of a nearby grazer

towered over me. With a slithering sound the Ant-machine began to

lubricate its head parts. The Zoot jumped down from its back and stood

beside me.

`What did you say?' The Zoot asked as he hit the ground.

`Why did the Ant-machine bring us here? What ***are*** these... things?'

The Zoot seemed to consider his answer carefully. 'Ants don't see very

well.' He slapped the nearest grazer. Its hide rippled in slow fleshy waves

but other than that his action seemed to produce no reaction at all. 'Hear

either, for that matter.' After a second or two, a trickle of light bled away from the point of impact, tiny yellow-green sparks pulsing sluggishly

along the body towards the head, where they gathered in a tiny glowing

knot, which pulsed once brightly and then faded. The great creature

began ponderously to turn, finally reacting to the stimulus.

Ì think it brought us here because you smell like they do.'

`What?' I felt suddenly sick. 'Me and these things, the same? You're off

your nuts!'

The grazer's snuffling head turned then and, as we moved out of the

lumbering creature's path, I caught sight of an eye, blue and milky, yet

unmistakably human, peering at me incuriously from the semi-

transparent hill of blubber that was the thing's head.

'I think these "cows" are your great, great, great, great, great, great grandchildren.'

I sat down then for a while. The pink sponge wasn't exactly soft but it was

better than glass. The Zoot tried to make conversation but I told him where

to jump off. He shrugged and mooched off to explore. The grazers — were they really the descendents of humans, people like me? — milled aimlessly

around, eating, eating, always eating. The sound of them snuffling and

slurping made me feel sick. Every so often an Ant-machine would sidle up

to a grazer and stroke it and the disgusting smell would come again as the machine lubricated itself. Fire, the wheel, the motor car, the Statue of

Liberty, is this what they'd all come to — black glass and blubber and a sky where the only clouds moved across the face of the sun itself?

I looked up when the soft, ever-present hooting of the grazers changed

pitch. A note of alarm entered their voices. As much as they ever seemed

to react to anything, this was alarm.

A moment later the Zoot bounced back into view, scarf flapping, hat

jammed down hard, face barely containing that insane grin.

'What's the story?'

'We've got company.'

He was right. The grazers were stampeding now, well, for them anyway,

moving for once in the same direction and at the same speed — slightly

faster than a baby could crawl.

And then it appeared. Another Ant-machine.

This one was red.

The response from the nearest black Ant-machine was instant. It

whirled, pistons screaming, antennae humming, charged hell-for-leather

at the intruder.

The red Ant-machine reared, its own mechanics squealing. Black and

Red Ant-machines met with a sound like an auto-wreck, mandibles

churning. Static electricity crackled. Lightning flickered across the metal

giants.

I jammed my hands to my ears.

There was a scream of rending metal. The black Ant-machine fell, two

limbs twisted ruin, half its head sheared away.

The red *Ant machine* reared again, undamaged, hit the ground with

-

a shock I felt a hundred yards away, and then moved towards us.

Ìt's from another nest,' the Zoot bellowed above the screech of metal

and the cries of alarm from the damaged black Ant-machine. 'It wants the

grazer. We're witnessing a war of territories.'

Ànkle it!'

Ìf we run it'll kill us.' Amazingly, the Zoot held his ground.

`What then!?'

`The perfume you stole this morning from the woman with the hat. Give

it to me.'

Somehow I didn't think to argue. I grabbed the bottle from my pocket

and tossed it to the Zoot.

In return I got a package he fished from his own pocket. 'A party

hooter?!'

Ì know what it is. Just blow it. Now! As loud as you can. Don't stop until

I tell you!'

The Zoot pulled another hooter from his pocket and stuck it in his

mouth. He blew hard. The coloured paper tube unravelled with a honk.

The sound was pathetic. Next thing I knew, the Zoot was waving

something. A football rattle. Where had that come from?

`Forward men and form ranks! Advance!'

I barely made the words out over the ridiculous hooting noise.

`This means you!'

And with that he ran straight at the shrieking red Ant-machine, rattle

clacking, party hooter unravelling as he blew, spraying five-dollar

perfume as he ran.

Òfay, you can leave that to Gordon.' I stood perfectly still, debating

whether to run or just watch the Zoot get dismembered. I was on the point

of running when the red Ant-machine stopped dead in its tracks. The Zoot

ran on, spraying perfume, rattling and hooting. The red Ant-machine

tilted its head to one side, antennae humming and crackling. It's

mandibles opened dangerously wide.

The Zoot ran right up to the red Ant-machine and stopped.

For a second they just stared at each other, baby grand and bug-eyed

Betty. Both off their nuts if you want my opinion.

Then, quick as blinking, the red Ant-machine turned and ran.

The Zoot howled triumphantly, waving his rattle as if demented. The

party hooter flew from his mouth to lie forgotten on the ground. Moments

later, as the Zoot turned, a grazer stepped on it, crushing it flat — the

animal's blubbery foot missed the Zoot by about an inch.

He waved, jumping with glee. 'You see? You see? Evolution in effect.

Faced with an unfamiliar threat the programmed behaviour is to retreat

and re-think.'

The Zoot didn't even notice that I had practically gone out of my way not

to help him.

`You saved the day.' He held out the perfume bottle to me. It was empty

What else?

`You smell *like* a two-bit dance-hall date,' I told him flatly.

He just grinned.

The grin didn't last long. Almost right away it turned into a frown. Then

a look of alarm.

`What —?'

He was looking past me.

I turned, then right away wished I hadn't.

About a hundred black Ant-machines were lined up there. Somehow

I just knew they were all looking at us. Mandibles scissored open and shut

with a noise like your kid brother changing gear.

With a final clack-ack-ack the football rattle hung limp in the Zoot's hand.

`Futz,' I said.

The Ant-machines charged.

They ran past us of course. It was the red Ant-machine they were

Interested in. Kill the intruder. I'd seen gin-mill torpedoes behave the

same way — only with baseball bats decorated with masonry-nails not

eighty-ton robots. I sidestepped one machine as it clanked past, then

found myself standing nearby the fallen Ant-machine. The Zoot was

standing on tiptoes, head and shoulders inside the ripped open head of **the** metal monster. He seemed to be humming.

Àh!' I heard him say in muffled but delighted tones. 'Central node

processing. Splendid!'

He backed slowly out of the opening and sat cross-legged on the pink

spongy ground.

`What are you doing?'

Òrganising a day out at the palace.'

The Zoot seemed to concentrate. I became aware of an odd smell.

The Ant-machine shuddered.

It stood up.

`Come on!' The Zoot reached out cupped hands. I shrugged and stepped

In, and found myself boosted onto the machine's broad back.

A moment later the Zoot was sitting beside me.

Ì'd sit down if I were you,' he said. 'Cross-legged, that's the ticket. Must **remember** to thank the Emperor Poros for teaching me the correct way to 53

ride an elephant. Didn't have an opportunity at the time, as I recall. Poor

chap was too busy repelling Alexander the Great's army from the banks of

the Bosporus.'

The Ant-machine rocked to life. I sat down quickly. The Zoot was

making a harness out of his scarf. 'What comes down must go up.'

I remembered the near-vertical crater wall. 'And how!'

We climbed into the harness as the Ant-machine lurched towards the

edge of the crater.

`Well, you got your very own breezer now,' I told the Zoot. 'Where's this

palace anyway?'

Ì don't know.' The Doctor patted the Ant-machine's rusty metal back.

Àdam here does though. Don't you old boy?'

`So how do you know that —'

`He'll take us there? That's easy. I can control pheromonal emission.

Took lessons from a friendly Menoptra a long time ago, always thought it

might come in useful one day.' The Zoot glanced sideways at me. 'I think

I told Adam we'd make a choice snack for Her Majesty.'

`Man, you really know your onions.' I muttered sarcastically. 'The

Queen, huh?'

Òf the Bug-Eyed Betties.' He grinned. 'Hang on!'

Balanced precariously on its four remaining legs and with the two

stumps waving idiotically and raining slow oil, the Ant-machine began to

walk up the crater wall.

In a shallow plain of fused glass, pitted with the tracks of countless

stiletto legs, stood the black Ant-machine's nest. I had to admit it was

impressive. There were two — I don't know if buildings was the right word

exactly but I didn't have another so it would have to do — two buildings,

one like a huge ball, the other an enormous pointed tower. The buildings

were connected by a spiral ramp which rose from ground level, wound

once around the ball without touching it and into the tower, then finally

through the tower and into the ball. The nest wasn't small, either. The ball shaped building stood as high as the Empire State Building, the tower

even taller. They seemed to be made out of milky white glass. I could *see* shapes moving inside. Dim lights and wriggling shadows. Ant-machines?

More ant-machines moved in steady lines to and from the nest across the

plain of glass. I wondered, not for the first time, what was sitting in the

driver's seat of those monster jalopies.

There was something else. A nagging feeling. Something about the

place was familiar — I'd seen it before — I just couldn't put my finger on

where. I was about to bring this up when the Ant-machine carrying us

shuddered. A metallic shriek emerged from somewhere inside its body.

The Ant jerked, stopped, jerked again, then fell slowly over onto its side

and was still. I jumped off as it toppled, managed to land without

breaking anything, though I definitely added to my collection of bruises.

The Zoot simply stood up, walked calmly over the toppling giant so **that**

he remained upright as it fell, finally grasping a still-jerking leg and sliding down it like a fireman's pole, to stand beside me.

He took off his hat. His expression was sad, but sorta proud. Like

a dapper who'd just planted his favourite dog.

Ìt's just a flivver ,' I told him. 'Would you cry over some scrapyard

jalopy?'

He looked at me steadily, then put his hat back on.

`Scrapyards and jalopies are very dear to my heart.'

Darb . Just darb. So now you're gonna tell this Queen of the Betties you

totalled her prize bus?'

`Me? No. Them? Maybe.'

The Zoot crooked a long finger at my feet.

I looked down. 'Ants! Jeez! I hate ants!'

`Really? For me it's spiders.'

As if I gave a hoot. 'Where'd they come from, anyways?'

The Zoot swivelled his finger. I followed the gesture until I was looking

at the collapsed remains of the Ant-machine. A river of ants was emerging **from the** fractured hull.

`You meanta tell me there's little ants inside these... Giant Ants?'

`What did you expect? Poodles? Perhaps a chicken? A herd of

elephants?' His voice darkened. 'All gods create in their own image, you

know...'

The wheeze of pistons made me look around. From all sides black Ant-

machines were converging on us. Rapidly they began to dismantle **the**

fallen machine. Meanwhile the river of ants pouring from the hole in its **head showed no sign of stopping. They must have been packed in there**

like sardines. Trying to control my revulsion I peered closer at the ants.

They were shimmering black and about an inch long. Their bodies, tiny

by comparison to the machine they controlled, shone dully in the

shadowy red sunlight.

Fighting revulsion, I groped in my pocket, found a crumpled packet,

then remembered the pack of gum was empty.

'Y2 gotta stick?'

Ì'm afraid not.'

`Figures.' I scowled. 'All right then. They're ants. So what?'

The Zoot crouched low to the ground. He reached down a hand, drew it

back with a single ant perched on the end of his forefinger. He doffed his

hat. The ant waved its antennae and began to stroke his fmgertip.

Òfay, you're completely zozzled.'

Òn the contrary. I seem to have found us another ride.'

The Zoot sat cross-legged on the ground — on the ants. A moment

passed and then he began to to slide sideways, still cross-legged, away

from me across the glassy ground. He looked back and grinned. 'It tickles

a bit but otherwise a very relaxing mode of transportation. Coming?'

`Thanks all the same.' I shuddered in revulsion at the thought of

thousands of tiny legs touching mine. 'I'll walk.'

Behind us, the process of demolition continued on the ruined Ant-

machine. The eighty-ton carcass was reduced to its components and

carried piece by piece, along with me and the Zoot, into the nest.

I made it as far as the base of the ramp circling the great ball of milky

glass. The ramp was wide, wide enough for two lanes of Ant-machine

traffic to pass without touching. But there were no walls or rails. The

surface of the ramp turned out to be slippery — covered in grease or

oil.

Neither the ants nor their machines had a problem with it but I was

stymied.

Ìt's a defence mechanism,' the Zoot called back from where the ants

had hauled him further up the ramp. 'It's the only way in. Only native ants

can enter the nest.'

I wasn't impressed. It meant I had no choice but to sit down and be

carried. The Zoot was high up on the ramp, almost completely out of sight

as the ants carrying me began the ascent.

The journey was strange though not as uncomfortable as riding on the

damaged Ant-machine. And it gave me a chance to rest, which I hadn't

realised I needed. I just hoped the ants wouldn't need a gasp too and put

me down. There was no handrail, no grip on the ramp, and it was a very

long way down.

By now we were several storeys high. Above me, the base of the building

continued to curve out and away, like a roof above the ramp. Now I could

make out slots in it. The slots were discoloured in the same way metal will

discolour if you play a blowtorch on it. After a moment wondering what

might come out of those holes to rain down on any potential invaders,

I looked away. Whatever it might be, it was out of my hands.

We continued to climb. As we did so the world which until now I'd seen

only from ground level gradually unfolded before me. I wriggled around

until I had my back to the curved building and was being carried sideways,

facing out from the ramp to the landscape beyond.

56

When I was a kid I'd sneaked into the Empire State Building and ridden

the elevators to the top. I had it in mind to fleece the tourists and other fish but I got sidetracked by the amazing view. That was the only day I can

remember going home with empty pockets. Now here I was a coupla

scullion

years in the future and nothing worth a nickel to lift. But there

was this view, right? This nightmare view, right there in front of me, and I couldn't escape from it.

It was one thing to see see little bits of a world, and another thing

completely to see it as a whole. Because now I knew. Now I knew

everything the Zoot told me was true. This was Earth. This was New York.

This was my home. A home turned into some dope-struck nightmare, and

I didn't need no dime-store cheaters to see it.

The gigantic building I was still only halfway up towered over a plain of

glass. The ground rose away from me in a shallow curve. Looming within

the distant cliffs were conical towers topped by spheres, the dead city

I had seen earlier in the day. Further into the distance a few of the highest towers actually emerged from the ground, and these were disintegrating

skeletons, little more than rusting superstructure. Somewhere close to the

horizon I could see a thin fogbank, a gleam of yellow-green light defying

the red dimness of the sky: the Ant-meadow, where the humans grazed

like cows, waiting without thought to be harvested.

None of that was what really caught my eye.

What held my attention was much nearer the ground. Under it, in fact,

and less than half a mile away. From this height I could see right down **into** the glassy ground like it was a frozen lake. Red sunlight penetrated **here** with almost no resistance, falling through a surface which must have **risen** hundreds, thousands of yards over time.

Preserved in the earth forever was a familiar shape. I gazed at its angular

beauty and wanted to scream They said it was built to last. They said there'd never be another building like it. They weren't selling wooden

nickels. Until today it had been just a tourist trap, an opportunity to fleece **a few** gullible fish, maybe hit on a flapper, maybe just grab a hot one and **toast** my dead, dumb-ass mother. But that was then, and then was all over **now,** bar the shouting.

This morning it had been the tallest building on my skyline. Now

I could look down upon it from the dizzying heights of the nightmare world time had built over its glassy grave. Something inside me changed,

right there and then. I didn't know what but I felt it break.

I would never look upon the Empire State Building the same way again.

* * *

57

Inside the nest, things seemed to get real sticky, real fast.

Let's get one thing straight. I ain't the kinda fish that can't take care

hisself. I got the smarts. I got the looks. Okay, I don't always got the luck, but who does? The thing I pride myself most on, though, is this: I got a

trick. I can roll with the punches. I'm a good liar. I'm flexible. In this life you gotta adapt, you know what I'm saying? Adapt or die.

Take this Zoot, for instance. I could tell he was an adapter, like me.

I guess that was why I never stuck him with the switchblade when

I coulda. Kindred spirit, you with me? But older. Someone I could learn

a thing or two from, maybe. But then he gets us this one-way ticket into

the nest. Desirous of a little huggamug with Her Majesty the Queen of the

Bug-Eyed Betties. Well, that ain't for me. But like I said, I'm adaptable.

Turns out to be good thing I am. Here, let me tellya why.

First off, I didn't plan on being carried around all day by those ants.

Who knows where they would have taken me? Wherever they took the

grazers they used for food, I imagine. That's what the Zoot had told them

we were, wasn't it? The inside of the nest was made of the same glassy

material as the outside, smooth, solid, a maze of tunnels wide enough to

accommodate the Ant-machines. We passed one place where a tunnel

was

being built. Ant-machines seemed to be secreting some kind of liquid

resin which they shaped into curved walls and allowed to harden.

Thinking fast I scooped up a handful of resin as we passed. I sniffed it.

There was no odour. Shrugging, I smeared it over my clothes and rolled

off the ants that were carrying me. They milled helplessly. I remembered

what the Zoot had said. Nearly blind. Nearly deaf. Great sense of smell.

But now I smelled like the nest. I grinned.

I was invisible.

I didn't stick around to see what would happen. As the ants mooched

off into the shadowy tunnels, perhaps in search of further instructions,

I made like a tree — branched out.

I began to explore. Pretty soon I wished I hadn't. Almost the first place

I found was the larder. A huge chamber, smoothly curved, hot and steamy.

Moisture ran dripping from the walls. A dozen grazers milled aimlessly

within. One, snuffling, lapped moisture from a nearby wall.

The grazers were smothered in ants — normal-sized ants. I thought at

first they were being eaten. But the grazers didn't seem to be protesting.

Then I realised they were being milked. The ants came to and from the

grazers in a steady flow along two well defined paths, which vanished into

dark tunnels. The line moving away seemed to be a different colour.

Looking closer I saw why. Each ant was carrying a large drop of milky

fluid, many times its own size. Food — for the Queen?

58

I needed to find the Zoot. He was my ticket out of here, the only way

down that impassable ramp. I followed the line of ants carrying grazer

milk. And that was how I came to the strangest place I'd seen yet.

Mom took me to chapel once, just once, when I was a kid. I could see

she desperately wanted me to join in, tòget it,' be 'at one' with the

congregation. Looking back, I could see the attraction for someone weak,

the way Mom turned out. It was... solemn, awesome, kinda scary. You felt

like your own problems weren't so big. But it was stupid too, you know

what I'm saying? That was what put me offin the end. I didn't want to look as stupid as those fish, all doing the same things at once, the same

actions, singing the same words to the same hymns. I was me. I wanted to

choose what I did and what I thought. I wanted to be different. What did

I know? I was just a kid. I didn't know from nothin'.

The place I found myself in now was a lot like that church. It was a tall chamber, with curved walls which met at a point high above me. At

intervals in the walls there were slots through which shafts of

dull red

daylight trickled sluggishly. The daylight bounced around the slick

interior, giving the chamber a glow, like fire light. I thought ifI was an ant, inside an empty artillery shell someone had drilled holes through and

shone a brake light into, maybe it would look something like this.

Under the highest point of the roof, a tall spire of white glassy material rose from the floor to a sharp point about twenty feet high. I moved closer to the spire. In the shafts of sunlight it looked like clear red ice. I looked closer. I could see something inside. Something familiar. One half of

a metal cylinder about as high as a man, with bullet-shaped ends. I crept closer. Inside the cylinder was a book. No — a magazine. Part of one,

anyways. A few crumbling pages, part of a cover; splashes of colour

bleached to pinks and blacks by the sunlight.

There were words. Amazingly, I could read them. 'Faces Through The

Ages'. There were pictures too, two rows of four and then two larger ones underneath. The first picture was of a fish's face; the fourth a reptile's; the seventh a chimpanzee; the ninth, a man. They were a sequence. 'Modern

Man,' I read. `Nature's Latest Step Forward.' It was a picture of any regular Joe you might happen to bump into on the street. The largest picture was

labelled 'Man of the Future'. He was plug-ugly and no mistake. An

arrogant, emotionless face topped by a gigantic, hairless cranium. A high hat if ever there was one. I hated him right off. `Ya dumb Dora,' I told the ancient artist. `Ya got that wrong. And how!' I tried a laugh but looking at the picture, thinking about the grazers — the real *Man of* the Future — the laugh stuck in my

throat.

Fingers tracing the page within its glassy prison, I moved sideways.

59

Now the front cover of the magazine came into view. This was torn, or

rotted, I couldn't tell which. All could make out was part of the drawing,

a man on a metal table surrounded by glowing electrical equipment,

menaced by a mad-professor type. There were words here too. The Gland

Superman'. The Atom Smasher'. 'Artificial Hell'. 'Horror's Head'.

The upper part of the cover was badly damaged but I didn't need to read

the words to know what I was looking at. I'd seen it only this morning, on

newstands all around the fair.

The October 1939 issue ofAmazing Stories Magazine.

So I mooched out of there and followed the line of ants to the Queen's

chamber. Fortunately I was still 'invisible', because for once I really wasn't taking a heck of a lot of notice of what was going on around me. That

happens, I guess, when the shocks pile up one on another, until they're a

wall you can't climb over no matter how much you want to. I was dimly

aware of a sound like a summer storm gathering in the distance,

resonating around the nest, making the smooth walls shake. I wondered

briefly about the weather here. There didn't seem to be much of it.

Then I thought the sound was more like big lorries, or maybe tanks,

rumbling through a war-torn city. Then I reached the Queen's chamber,

and there was the Zoot, sitting cross-legged on a small dome of milky

glass, surrounded by ants, and all thought of the sound faded from my

mind.

This chamber, though not as large as the larder, was still big enough so

that six Ant-machines could stand guard at equally spaced distances

around the curved walls. The Zoot had his eyes shut, and was mumbling

to himself. I looked around for the Queen, expecting perhaps to see

another Bug-Eyed Betty the size of a locomotive.

The Queen, when I spotted her, was quite small. Only about six inches

or so from tip to tail. Of course that was gigantic compared to the other,

normal-sized ants. She was perched on the palm of the Zoot's

outstretched hand. They were almost nose to nose. I could tell

a conversation of some kind was taking place. I waited. The Zoot was right

about one thing. Given the circumstances I'd have been off my nuts to

draw attention to myself.

After a few minutes the Zoot said, 'Oh, good you've arrived.' His eyes

opened and he looked right at me. 'Don't worry, the Queen ***and*** I have had a little heart to heart. Our status has been upgraded.'

`We're not a dime store snack, you mean?'

He frowned uncomfortably. 'More like an exotic delicacy you want to

save for just the right moment.'

60

`That moment being...?'

'We-ell... after the war, I suspect.'

I frowned. I could feel my mouth shaping the word, War,' but sound stubbornly refused to emerge. 'I found a magazine,' I said suddenly. 'In a tube, in a kind of shrine. There were pictures. Fish, monkeys. A man.'

I gulped. War!?

The Zoot's expression softened in understanding. 'This kind of experience can be a bit of a blow. I'd have a drink if I were you. It's *nice* **and** warm. Plenty of sugar. Cushion the culture shock a bit.'

He held out a squashy globe, like a milky pearl, about the size ofa plum.

Grazer milk.

I shuddered.

'In fact I insist.'

I stared at the wobbly pearl.

Ìt's quite delicious. Besides,' he added in conspiratorial tones.

'Between you and me, the Queen will probably be insulted if you don't.'

I thought for a moment about what insulting a Queen whose army probably ranked in the billions might result in. Then I took the milky grape, stuffed it in my mouth and swallowed hard, without chewing.

The Queen's antennae vibrated. She produced a harsh crackling sound.

`There you see. Niceties have been exchanged.'

Ìt tasted disgusting. Like a lump of rancid butter.'

The Zoot's voice darkened. `That lump of rancid butter is a week's food

for the Queen's family.'

'Trust me. I'm flattered.'

`You should be. The Meadow is the ants' last chance for survival.' The

Zoot glanced at the Queen, still sitting quite comfortably in the palm of

his hand. `The Earth is sterile. The Meadow is a geological accident, the

last place on the entire planet the grazers can feed.'

'And the ants?'

'They inherited the planet millions of years ago, evolving in symbiosis

with a human species brought to the edge of extinction by vulcanism and

solar flares. As the Earth slowly died, every other species became extinct,

unable to compete with the most efficient and cooperative form of life to

evolve in its long history. For millions of years the Earth was populated by thousands of nests like this. But that was long ago. The wheels of

evolution grind slowly but surely. And they never stop. Now there are only

two of the great Nests left on the whole of the Earth. The black ants and **the** red ants. But there's only one Meadow. Only enough food to sustain **one** Nest. And even that won't last.' The Queen, picking up on the Zoots **tone** of voice, quivered. À war is coming. The last war ever to be fought I,

on this world, I should imagine. One last war and then... just eternal night drawing a final curtain across this act in the great play of life.'

He blew out his cheeks and huffed softly. 'Unless...'

He stared at me.

There was a moment of silence.

I became aware ofthe sound then, the sound I thought was thunder. But

it wasn't thunder, I realised suddenly. It was the sound of metal smashing

into glass. An army marching to war. An army of Ant-machines. Off to

fight the last war the world would ever see. The chamber walls shook.

I locked eyes with the Zoot.

He nodded. The red ants are moving to attack the Meadow. They want

the grazers for themselves.'

Ànd the black ants will defend their food supply.'

Èverything has a historical precedent,' muttered the Zoot darkly. 'There

once were two cats of Kilkenny.' His eyes bulged and he shook his head

sadly. 'It's going to be genocide.'

`The world's ending and you want to beat your gums about a coupla

Harps?'

The Zoot clucked his tongue impatiently. 'There once were two cats of

Kilkenny. Who each thought there was one cat to many. So they fought

and they hit and they scratched and they bit until instead of two cats there weren't any.' The Zoot frowned. 'I'd have thought you of all

people would

have been familiar with Prohibition poetry.'

I scowled. 'We should blow this party while we still got all four limbs

attached.'

The Zoot studied me closely. 'Of course we should, of course we

should,' he said, with sudden warmth. 'After all, it's not your world is it?

Not the New York you know. Not your comfortable home with jazz clubs

and two cent dance hall tickets and dime store rattlers and cheap

speakeasies and the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty and

all *those people* to *steal from.* Is it?'

I thought of the Empire State buried in glass.

`Why should I care about what happens to this cock-a-mamie world?

I couldn't care from nothing! It ain't my fault it's here. It ain't my

responsibility to sort it out! What can we do anyway? They're just ants for

crying out loud! It's not like they're important! It's too late for —'

I stopped abruptly.

men like you?' the Zoot finished gendy. 'In the fifty million years this

cosmic scrapheap you call your home has drifted through space more

than a billion, billion distinct species of life have evolved upon it. Mankind is only one.'

`But I don't care about the others!' I was shouting now. The Ant-

machines ranged around the chamber shifted. Their heads tilted to study

me. 'I don't care about them! I only care about —'

I stopped then. Bit the words off.

The Zoot looked at me strangely. His smile was very gentle. 'Everything

is connected. What would your mother say if she could hear you speak like **this?**'

I choked.

`Wouldn't she be disappointed? Wouldn't she say she'd tried to bring

you up better than this? Wouldn't she wonder how all of her love and sacrifice and pain had come to such a selfish end?'

`What —' the word jerked out of me. 'What — the —futz — do you know

about my mother =

The Zoot's expression intensified.

Something smooth and cold filled my hand. The switchblade. I could

take him. Take him now. Just stick it in him and all of this would go away.

Òfay, you're off your nuts,' The words were my own. Coming from the

Zoot they sounded strange, as alien as this world. 'My mother planted

herself a year ago last Tuesday. On a toot until the day she ossified. Sarge **said** if the Man hadn't already done it, he coulda turned prohibition on its **head** with the juice they wrung from her liver.'

`Yeah, so what?' I shouted. I waved the switchblade. 'So I said that, so

futzin what?'

Now the Zoot spoke again, and these were words I was sure I had not

spoken out loud. 'The money she got for that watch killed her so I mixed **the** guy who bought it a molotov. Now he's broke and homeless. Touch

sunburned too by all accounts.'

I made a funny choking sound. Took a step towards the Zoot,

switchblade uppermost. I forgot for a second he was holding the Queen

in his hand.

As one, the six Ant-machines moved in my direction, antennae

humming, mandibles poised to attack. The Zoot glanced at the Queen

and made some soothing clicking noises. The Queen buzzed softly in

response. The Ant-machines stopped.

I stood rigid.

The Zoot looked at me sadly. 'Today you've read a magazine, stolen

some perfume, considered the death of your mother and witnessed the

end of the world she brought you screaming into. It's hard when we lose **the** ones we love. The ones close to us. Especially if we think all that pain **was** for nothing. But then the terrible self-sacrifice of tragedy is addictive, **don't** you think? That's the danger. Over time the feelings of bitterness 63

and betrayal, regret and revulsion become familiar, almost comforting. In

many ways we're like children clinging onto our toys. Believe me I know

how hard it can be to put those toys away.'

I spluttered.

`What's that word you have? Dewdropper? Is that what she'd have

thought of you? Son, you're a *dewdropper*. With your hood friends and your two-bit Sheba and your gin-mill switchblade? Dewdropper.

Would she

have said that about you?'

`You quit beatin' your gums You're full of baloney, you know that? Full

of it!'

`No. She wouldn't have said that. She loved you. She'd have encouraged

you to read, maybe even read to you herself Amazing Stories. Weird Tales.

The Holy Bible. She wanted you to be all that you can be. All that she

wanted for you. And more. All you wanted for yourself.'

Ì ain't no dewdropper!'

À dewdropper is a young man who stays in bed all day. He *sleeps* all day.

He doesn't have a job. He doesn't have any pride. He hates himself. But

you know all about that... don't you?' The Zoot's voice lowered to

a whisper. 'Do you hate yourself so much you'd let a world die?'

Ì — I —' The words jerked out of me. I jerked too, some kinda puppet.

I felt cold and hot, bitterly sad and righteously angry all at once. I took a step towards the Zoot, then pulled back. I ain't proud to say that futzin'

Ethel scared the pants offa me. The last time anyone scared me like that

I wore long socks and short trousers.

Òfay, you're offa your nuts! It ain't my problem! I just want to go back!

There's nothing I can do anyway! There's nothing I *can do!'*

Àh, ha!' The Zoot grinned. 'What if I said there was?'

The Zoot's plan was the very cream of prize baloney. Planning on buying

some wooden nickels? This guy owned the bank.

We stood together at the head of the spiral ramp as an army of Ant-

machines numbering in the thousands stamped in orderly lines out of the

nest and across the plain of glass. The ground shook at their passing and

deep cracks opened up for hundreds of yards to either side of the lines at

each step. It was like watching an earthquake take a stroll. A sound like

cannon-fire rolled across the plain as they moved, crashing against the

hills and echoing there like distant thunder. A fog of glass dust rose into

the air as they moved.

Perhaps by chance a flare of white light bloomed on the surface of the

sun, its light refracted by the mist of glass suspended in the air. For a few minutes the last rainbow the world would ever see shone upon the plains

of glass and the tremendous army of black Ant-machines marching

across it to war.

I looked at the Zoot, wondering if this was the day the human race

would finally end.

`This idea of yours better work.'

`Didn't I say?' Making a noose from his scarf the Zoot grabbed me and

swung us both high onto the back of a passing Ant-machine. We landed

with a thump as the Ant-machine began to descend the ramp. Far off

across the distant hills another rainbow bloomed as the light from the sun

swirled and faded. The red ant army, on the move.

`Million-to-one shots are my stock-in-trade.'

So we rode to war on the back of an eighty-ton breezer, and as we lurched

across the buried corpse of New York I told the Zoot again about the

magazine I'd seen inside the nest.

This time he listened. To be honest maybe he listened before **but** never **let on. I** found myself describing everything. The magazine, the pictures, the the story titles, the steel tube.

The Zoot stopped me then. 'This tube. You say there was only half. Did

it look broken?'

`No. It looked like it had **been made that** way.'

Às if it had been designed to be opened.'

`Yes.'

The Zoot looked at me suddenly and the noise of the marching army

seemed to fade.

`Tell me what you did this morning. Before we met. Tell me everything.'

I hesitated. 'I didn't do nothing today I ain't done every other day of my

life.'

Why did I feel ashamed then?

He waited.

I closed my eyes. Took a breath. And told him.

He listened carefully. I could see the universe spinning behind his eyes.

Afterwards, he nodded **solemnly. Then he asked me what my mother's**

name was. I told him that too. It couldn't hurt her any.

Enlightenment spread across his face. 'Of course. I understand now.'

Ùnderstand? Understand what?'

`Why you're here.'

I scowled. 'I'm here because I'm a prize Dora. I saw you following me

after I lifted that swanky skirt's perfume and thought you were some

kinda dick. Then I saw the writing on that blue cupboard of yours and thought you were a bull. Plainclothes or something. Fed, maybe.

I thought I'd hide out in there. Thought it was the one place you would

never look. Was I ever a sap!'

The Zoot was shaking his head. 'Listen to me carefully. The universe is

old beyond knowing, a place of immeasurable wonder and danger. But

even the universe has rules; natural laws which keep everything in

balance. Sometimes we can see those laws in effect. Sometimes we can

even give them a little push in the right direction. Mostly though, we're

just passengers, along for the ride, admiring the scenery. Oh, we can

aspire to make changes for the greater good. But sometimes,' His voice

lowered until it was barely audible above the din of the army. 'We can't

even see what the greater good really is.'

His eyes held mine. 'Do you understand?'

`You're beatin' your gums like some radio high-hat.' I told him. 'Science

Today, that sorta thing. I got no idea what you're talking about.'

The Zoot's expression hardened. 'You will,' he said. 'Soon.'

I was about to mutter a reply when the red Ant-machines attacked.

Have you ever been in a car crash? I told you I saw that breezer roll over

that fish once, right? This was worse. And how! Just imagine the biggest

view you ever had, then fill it up, wall to wall, with shrieking metal. The

Ant-robots were tearing and slashing at each other, neither asking for nor

showing mercy. It was like a mob fight, any weapon, no quarter, don't get

in the way. There had to be 10,000 of them, maybe more.

Several red Ant-machines converged on the machine we were riding as

we approached the lip of the Meadow-crater. Far off in the distance

I could hear the panicky hooting of the grazers, softened by the perpetual

steamy fog they lived in. The Zoot shouted something but by then my head

was ringing from the din of war, and I didn't hear him. The machine we

were riding reared onto its four back legs and hatches opened somewhere

in its belly.

There was a shriek of sound and I yelled along with it in pain.

Something hard and white blasted out from the belly of the Ant-machine.

Light. The machine had deployed some kind of weapon. Like a tightly

focused searchlight, the beam swung in a wide arc across the attackers. In

its glare the leading red Ant-machines withered, metal softening until it

ran like butter. Several collapsed into twisted wreckage, limbs jerking

feebly.

I shouted triumphantly. My joy didn't last. Ignoring the damage to their

fallen comrades, a horde of red Ant-machines swarmed over the half-

melted wreckage and attacked. Fanning out they approached rapidly from

all sides. There seemed to be no plan, no tactics. It was like a gang fight.

Smash anything within arm's reach, as hard as you can, until either it's

dead or you are.

The red Ant-machines closed with the machine we were riding. Now

the light-beam fired again but this time there were too many attackers.

Our machine was cut to pieces, torn apart beneath us.

`Jump!' It was the Zoot.

`You ain't whistling!' I hit the ground and rolled, winded. The Zoot

yanked me to my feet. Wreckage smashed into the ground where I had

been lying. Shrapnel tore at my exposed face and hands. Lightning

crackled everywhere; static electricity flashing as the great machines

smashed into one another over and over again.

`What now?' I gasped. Something razor sharp and white hot tore a hole

in my jacket.

`Now?' He grinned wildly. 'Now we implement my plan.'

`Ducky.' I scowled.

The red Ant-machines surrounded us. Their heads tilted as they scented

the air. I knew they could smell us. Smell me. Two of the closest scooped us up in their mandibles, one Ant-machine each carrying me and the

Zoot. They began to run.

The plan, apparently, was working.

The Red ant nest was a dead ringer for the black ant nest. A big sphere and spiked tower connected by a spiral ramp, all made from milky white glass.

Once again I struggled — and failed — to remember where I'd seen the

shape before.

The Zoot's plan was real simple. Let the red Ant-machines grab a whiff

of human — me, in other words — and let them whisk us off to the nest. The Zoot planned to communicate with the red ant Queen in the same way he

had with the black ant Queen. Just what exactly he planned to chat about, I got no idea. In any case the plan seemed to change when we reached the

nest.

The red Ant-machines carried us into the nest, deposited us in the

larder and took themselves off, presumably to the ant equivalent of

a maintenance garage for refit, and then back to the war for some more

mayhem.

By now I was feeling hungry, thirsty and sick. Part of me wanted to grab

a spell in the nearest speakeasy, another part just wanted to knock back a coupla aspirin and sack out for 12 hours straight. I consoled myself with the knowledge that the nearest gin-mill was half a mile straight down and fifty million years behind me. No easy outs there.

As if sensing my exhaustion, the Zoot grabbed a crumpled paper bag

from his pocket and held it out to me. 'Jelly baby? No?' He looked

disappointed. A foil tube appeared to replace the bag. 'Myron Space

Rations?'

I sighed. 'You want me to eat toothpaste?'

`Not toothpaste. Vitamins, minerals and glucose in concentrate form.'

He squeezed a knuckle of pale blue paste onto his finger, raised it to his

lips and sucked. `Mmm. Minty.'

So I grabbed the tube. It was that or crash. In truth the goop didn't taste

that bad. A moment passed and then I began to feel a warmth rushing

through me to replace the cold stiffness in my limbs. The tired headache

I'd been suffering for several hours now began to fade.

`Better?'

`You know it is.' I scowled. `So now what?'

He checked his watch. 'We-ell... it is Sunday I think a visit to church is

in order, don't you?'

The layout of the nest was identical to the black ant nest. I reminded the

Zoot about using resin from the walls to disguise out scent. Finding the

shrine was easy. The chamber was the same as I remembered from before:

high, curved walls sweeping up to a peak, slots in the walls allowing

shafts of red sunlight to illuminate the central spire.

Inside the spire, a twin to the steel tube I had seen in the black ants'

nest.

Inside the tube, scraps of paper. Ink making words. Stories from

another time.

The Zoot almost ran across the chamber in sheer excitement. Pulling

what looked like some kind of bicycle lamp from his pocket he shone it

into the interior of the spire. The lamp was tiny but the light was brighter than any bull's flashlight.

`Well?'

Òh, my word!' The Zoot was mumbling excitedly. The Gland Superman by

Ed Earl Repp. A classic.' The light shifted. I saw a torn page containing an illustration: a cat caught in a ray of light from some kind of machinery.

Under the picture, a caption. 'My God, Gale,' the Zoot cried in feverish

emulation of the pulp. 'The cat's ***growing!'***

He turned to stare at me, eyes shining like his flashlight.

`This is it.

'It?'

Àll that's left. Everything from your time. The Gland Superman.

Artificial Hell. Horror's Head. The Atom Smasher.' He seemed to glow

with excitement. 'Revolution of 1950. Didn't you read it?'

Ìt only hit the stands this morning. The Westinghouse people must

have got an advance copy or something. I saw it, sure. Along with all the other stuff they stashed in the tube. But read it? No.'

`No, no of course not Why would you?' The words came in a rush. 'You

were busy lifting perfume from that woman with the hat. You must have

seen the exhibit though.'

`Well, sure. I ran through it didn't I? It was kinda hard to miss. What

a fuss. Big steel tube, the bible, all those bits of metal, the rags, the rest of that junk. Knocked a bunch of it over as I recall. Had to wiggle some to

dodge your pals in blue.'

`Junk?' The Zoot shook and ran a large-fingered hand across his face

and into his hair. 'Junk!' He blew out his cheeks in a gesture of

exasperation. 'There are times when the capacity of the human species for criminal understatement can border on genius!'

Suddenly angry, I grabbed my switchblade out my pocket and waved it

at him.

The Zoot just huffed impatiently. 'Oh, put it away, just put it away. The time for childish things is long past, do you hear me? Long past. It's time to listen. Listen to the voice of history proclaiming an end to all things human.'

I didn't get it. He just kept talking, never stopped. Why wasn't he scared?

`Time to learn the part history has chosen for us in its great drama.'

I folded the blade, shoved it back into my pocket.

`Butt me,' I said. 'Or get it off your chest.'

'Smoking's bad for your health,' he said. 'Still it's all a matter of scale.

Look at Yellowstone. That's where it started you know.'

The park?'

`The supervolcano. Crème Brulee, remember?'

`Tell me something I don't know.'

The Zoot whirled, tapped a fingernail rapidly against the surface of the

glass spire, a handspan from the metal cylinder within. 'You see this?

Steel, you said? A pedestrian guess but not unexpected. This is an alloy.

A mixture of metals, synthesised especially for this tube. The only one of its kind anywhere in the world. Designed to withstand the passage of

time. Five thousand years. Inside? Books, magazines, photographs,

lithographs, fabrics, metals, woods, seeds. A message to the future. We

were here. We were real. We lived and loved and died. So long ago for you, the people of 6939. But we were here and we want you to remember us,

and through you live again. That's what the Westinghouse Electric and

Manufacturing Company thought when they buried their time capsule in

the 1939 *New* York World's Fair. But what if they *built too* well? What if their 69

message to the future overshot its mark? What then? Oh, the capsule

might survive, live through the holocaust, the slow burn of entropy. But

what of the contents? What of the contents when the seal was broken;

io,000, a million, a billion years past the date to which it was sent?'

The Zoot drew a breath, seemed to gather himself. 'Humans. Your

arrogance never ceases to amaze me. Hurling your hopes and fears and

petty kitchen sink dramas into the endless void of time. And all the while

thinking all you were doing was leaving a little calling card, a polite little note to the future. Here we were. Look at us. Weren't we *clever:*.

I backed up. The Zoot was losing it. His eyes were bulging and his hair

was sticking out from under his hat as if he'd grabbed a live one.

`By the time your little calling card was read you were gone, all of you,

your hopes and fears and lives and loves laid waste by incomprehensible

destiny; what animal remnants that survived through sheer dumb luck

were now mindless, because to lose one's mind was in evolutionary terms

easier than living with the fear of one's mortality as a species.'

The Zoot transfixed me with his gaze.

`Nature abhors a vacuum.'

He sucked in a breath.

`Men not so very different from you had already started to define those

who would rise to take your place.'

`These? They're just ants!' I shouted the words. I had to calm the Zoot

down before the racket he was making attracted attention we didn't need.

The Zoot fixed me with a sudden sideways look. Then he darted out of

the shrine, bent to scoop something from the ground, bounced back into

the shrine. 'They're just ants. That's what you said isn't it?'

He thrust his finger under my nose. On the very tip was a red ant. The

thing just perched there, antenna waving. It seemed quite comfortable.

Friendly even. Brainless bug-eyed Betty.

`Take a closer look.'

`What are you —'

`Just look!'

So I looked. It wasn't like I had a choice. The ant was an inch or so long.

Six legs, two antennae, glistening red where the other kind had *been*

black, but otherwise identical.

The Zoot was speaking. 'A self-organising adaptive system of

independent, autonomous mobile agents which can cooperate to

overcome obstacles and achieve programmed goals. A *swarm.'*

`Like I said,' I said. 'Ants.'

`Look *closer.'*

I shook my head. 'I don't —'

The Zoot sighed. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a slim metal

tube, like a cigar case. Holding it near his finger he thumbed a switch.

The ant fell off.

`Swarm behaviour algorythms can be used to synthesise evolutionary

solutions to previously insoluble problems.' His eyes held mine. 'They

can learn. They can imagine. Successful strains breed true. Less

successful strains die out and are replaced. They behave as if they're alive.

By any real definition they are alive.'

`You killed it.'

Ì temporarily deactivated it,' corrected the Zoot. 'With a precisely

focused release of electro-magnetic energy.'

I shook my head.

`Call it an EMP. A friend of mine in the military described an EMP as one of the more useful by-products of atomic fission. Don't worry, you'll find out all about it soon enough. It'll come clear in a flash.'

I crouched to examine the ant which lay motionless on the glassy floor.

And then, just like that, like snapping your fingers or turning on a light, I knew.

The red ant was a machine too.

`Robots envisioned in the Army-ant scenario are relatively small,

cooperative and autonomously goal-seeking.' The Zoot quoted with

a chill smile. 'Envisaged by A. Frederick Gordon and John Stanley

Thornton III in the early part of the twenty-first century.'

`Thornton? That's mom's name —' I stopped, suddenly cold. 'That's my

name.'

The Zoot released the trigger on his device. The ant rolled over and got

up. It waved its antenna uncertainly for a moment, then mooched off at

speed.

Ì thought you killed it.'

Ìt was able to reboot from the nest ganglion using microwave

transmission.'

`You what?'

'WiFi. All the rage for your great grandchildren.' The Zoot showed me

the cigar tube. 'Sonic screwdriver.' There was a tiny dial on it. He twisted it to the left. 'Temporary deactivation for one ant nearby.' He twisted it to the right. 'Permanent death for all ants in direct line-of-sight.' He slipped the tube back into his pocket.

`So... these ants are... machines.' Suddenly I needed to sit down. 'And...

you're telling me one of my children — great-grandchildren — will invent

them?'

Everything *is connected.*

71

The Zoot's words echoed back to me from what seemed like another

lifetime.

Beside me, the Zoot sighed. He seemed to lose much of his animation.

His voice even took on a sympathetic tone. 'And later, after the fire, they

will learn from their creators, even come to worship them in a strange

kind of way.' He nodded towards the glass spire containing the pages

from Amazing Stories Magazine. A blueprint on which they'd modelled

a society. Their bible. The irony is that now they've evolved so far they're virtually indistinguishable from real living organisms.'

'And the Ant-machines?'

`Presumably a response to the need to farm the last source of raw

materials this planet has to offer.'

`Human beings.'

`The grazing animals human beings have evolved over time to become.'

`But.: I stuttered. 'For crying out loud, they're just machines! Like...

cars! Kettles! What could machines possibly want from...' I swallowed.

`From animals?'

The Zoot shrugged. 'Organic molecules for raw materials. Oil for fuel.

Carbon. Oxygen. Rare metals. Who knows.' He crouched on the ground

beside me. I could feel the warmth coming off him in waves. 'All life

comes from the sun. The plants photosynthesise, the animals graze, and

at the top of the food chain are the ants. Talking of which...'

I looked up. We'd made too much noise. Or that one ant the Zoot

released had ratted us out. Whatever, the ants had noticed us. The shrine

was filling up with thousands of the creatures — and not slowly. They

moved across the floor and emerged in small rivers of wriggling life from

openings in the walls. Several Ant-machines stepped carefully among the

horde, heads lowered, mandibles aimed directly at us.

We were prisoners again.

The red Ant-machines herded us quickly to the Queen's chamber. I think

they planned a public execution. The Zoot seemed to want to forestall that

— but in the event it wasn't necessary.

Arriving at the Queen's chamber we learned that the red Ant nest had

become the center of a new tactic by the black Queen's army. Siege.

Failing to prevent the red Ant-machine army from gaining control of the

meadow-crater, the black Ants had surrounded the red Ant nest in an

effort to starve out the enemy.

The red Queen had a simple response. It involved those slots in the

sphere wall I had been so curious about on the black Ant nest. Behind

each slot was a chamber. In each chamber was an Ant-machine, belly

hatches open. Like the Ant-machines, the nests too were equipped with a

death ray.

Within moments of the seige, the air crackled with lightning as

a thousand beams of white light erupted from the nest.

Rows of black Ant-machines vaporised, exploding instantly as the

ground around the nest began to boil. Moments later, as the steam

cleared, I saw about half the rows of black Ant-machines had simply

vanished, and the glassy surface of the ground where they had stood was

now smooth and unrippled, free of footprints, like frozen water which

had melted and was now refreezing.

As the ground cooled, I waited for the beams to flash again. The black

Ant-machines held their ground. Why didn't they move back out of range?

For that matter why didn't the red Ants fire again?

From our vantage point in the Queen's chamber the Zoot observed the

battlefield and shook his head slowly. He crooked a long finger up at the sky. Black clouds were obscuring the surface of the sun. The light in the valley had already begun to dim.

`Their energy weapons are solar powered,' said the Zoot softly. Now we

have a chance.'

He sat cross-legged on the floor of the Queen's chamber and

concentrated. A strange smell pervaded the room, and for a moment

I caught a tantalising glimpse of his conversation with the Red Queen.

There were no words. Sights and sounds. Smells. It was overwhelming,

confusing. Only later did I make any sense of it.

The Zoot *was* explaining the truth about the Westinghouse time capsule. Where it had come from, what its contents were, how the world

of the ants had been affected by it. To them he must have been like a

prophet, come to demystify their ancient religious texts. But would they

see him as saviour or threat?

The cloying scent in the Queen's chamber increased. I coughed, shook

my head. Feeling half seas over had nothing on this. Outside the nest, red Ant-machines were streaming down the ramp, deploying along the still

cooling ground to face their ancient enemy.

Images suddenly rabbit-punched me in the head. And I understood the

Zoot's plan.

The problem was food. There wasn't enough food to feed the grazers.

There weren't enough grazers to supply raw materials for the ants. Ants

and humans had lived in symbiosis for millions of years and now they

were dying out. This was the end. The last act of life upon the Earth.

But the Zoot had a solution.

His million-to-one-shot plan.

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Inside the time capsule were other things besides scraps of books and

magazines. Samples of industrial materials, synthetics, natural cloths,

chemicals, metals. There were books and microfiche libraries containing

texts on any number of subjects from biology to chemistry to physics, to

religion, to sport, to entertainment.

Most importantly of all — there were *seeds.*

If scraps of paper had survived, so might the seeds have. With seeds

came crops. With crops came life. With effort the ground could be made

more fertile. -

Perhaps there were other craters where meteors had broken through

the crust. Or maybe with the help of technologies described in the

capsule

the ants themselves could excavate artificial ones.

The red Queen listened, quivering. Her reply did not come in words, but

I didn't need words to know what she said.

Everything in *the time capsule is* dead. Nothing but what you *see* survived.

The Zoot lowered his head. 'Fifty million years. Of course it's all gone.

How could I have thought otherwise?'

His million-to-one-shot had failed.

War is all that is left to us now.

Images filled my head. Ant-armies slaughtering each other; grazing

humans starving in the ruin of their hole in the ground, guarded by

nothing more than the rusting hulks of dead Ant-machines. The images,

filling my head, shocked me into action.

`No,' I said. 'The human race does not end today.'

I lifted the Zoot's tube.

Òne ant,' I twisted the dial to the right. 'All ants.'

I rested the tip of my thumb lightly on the trigger.

The Zoot gazed at me in horror. His hand flew to his pocket and then

fell when he realised what I had done. Outside I could hear the boom and

clash of great metal hulks slicing each other to pieces. The last war the

world would ever see. Inside my head a voice shrieked. It was the voice of

a world, crying out for a future only I could bring.

`No,' The Zoot said softly. 'We didn't come here for this. I didn't bring

you here for this. Not to destroy. Think what you're doing. There has to be

a better way.'

`What better way?' I asked contemptuously. I thought of my mother, of

the billions which would soon join her in death. 'I'll use this EMP of

yours. I'll kill the ants. I'll kill them all. They're only machines. They're going to kill themselves anyway. This way maybe my great great, great

great, great great grandchildren will have a chance at life.'

The Zoot said nothing. Recognising the threat, the red Ant-machines

protecting the Queen's chamber moved to attack. The Queen twitched.

The machines halted.

I stood there, thumb on the trigger. Waiting.

Push the damn button, the voice in my head cried. Just push it and *get* this *over with.*

`My TARDIS is a machine. Push that button and you'll kill the old girl

too. Then there'll be no way back for either of us. Think about it. Is that what you want? No more speakeasies, no more dance halls, no more

Sheba. What's her name, Jake? She's your future. Her or another like her.

The girl you love. Wouldn't you rather have a life and a family than starve

to death alone here in this cold future the universe has already forgotten?'

My fists clenched. My thumb trembled on the trigger. 'If I die here

I won't have any kids.' I smiled humourlessly. 'No kids, no future. Maybe

none of this will happen.'

He shook his head. The universe doesn't work like that.'

The universe? I could care less about the universe!' I raised the tube up

high above my head. 'So shut up! Just shut up! Christ I wish I could think.'

I reached into my pocket for some gum but the packet was empty.

I laughed hollowly. `Ya gotta stick?'

The Zoot looked at me strangely.

`Give me your shoe.'

'What?!'

`Give me your shoe. Give it to me!'

`Shut up!'

`Don't you want to try and save them first?'

Ì don't care! I told you I don't care about them! Just shut up!'

The Zoot moved then. I don't know why I didn't press the trigger.

He took my left shoe, examined it, huffed, threw it away.

`Your other shoe. *Give me your other shoe!'*

I gaped. He took it anyway.

I felt the trigger, cold metal beneath my thumb, as he pulled off the shoe

without even unlacing it. I imagined a billion ants and Ant-machines

Falling dead at once, never to rise again. Something made me wait.

And wait.

`Yes!' The Zoot was almost hopping with delight. 'Thank heavens for

Old Holborn Tobacco.'

He'd turned my shoe upside down. Pressed into the tread was a wad of

chewing tobacco. I must have stepped on it earlier while running through

the Westinghouse exhibit after lifting that skirt's perfume. I remembered knocking one of the exhibition stands over. Pressed into the tobacco were

a number of small, hard, round objects.

`Simplex triticus.' The Zoot's voice positively exploded with joy. 'Wheat!

Plain, common-or-garden, run-of-the-mill, ho-hum, everyday, non-GMO

wheat!'

The objects stuck to the bottom of my shoe were *seeds.*

The million-to-one-shot — heck, the billion-to-one-shot — had just paid

off.

The Queen's chamber came slowly back into focus. My arm was

hurting. I lowered it. The Zoot held out for the tube. As I handed it over

I was aware of movement at my feet.

About a hundred red ants were returning my shoe.

I stood on a plain of black glass under a bloated, cloud-scummed sun

which filled half the sky. An arm's length away was the Zoot's stupid-

looking blue cupboard. The door was open. The Zoot was inside.

`What are you waiting for?' His voice sounded a long way away,

plenty

more than just a few feet.

Ì'm thinking '

The Zoot's head popped out of the box.

Àbout?'

`What you said. How everything's connected.'

He grinned. 'Are you going to tell me your name now?'

I shrugged. What the heck. You can only die of embarrassment once.

`Jacob Abiathar Earl-Thornton.'

Abiathar,' said the Zoot delightedly. 'Did you know Abiathar means

"Father of Abundance" in ancient Hebrew?'

I walked into the box and pulled the door shut. Òfay, you might be

a pinko but you're no flat tyre, that's for sure.'

Ànyway,' the Zoot grinned. 'I think I'll just call you Jake.'

As usual the grin looked like it was never gonna stop.

It *wasn't entirely an animal. Nor — quite — was* it *completely a machine.*

It hunched on a plain of rippling *wheat beneath* a dully shining, blotched *red globe* which *completely covered the* sky. A human *being* from the twentieth century *would never have recognised* it *as a* hybrid of *organism* and *technology, a species new* to *this ancient, dying* world.

But then, strictly speaking, human *beings* hadn't walked the Earth *for quite some while.*

The HumAnt remained still, waiting, its skin *glistening in the* sunlight. Its mind did not functionin any way a human being from the twentieth century *would have recognised or understood. There were no emotions here. No fear, no awe, no* curiosity, *no love.* Its historical *and ecological context were so* peripheral as to *be meaningless.*

Of more importance ***were its immediate surroundings. The*** HumAnt *studied* them, minutely, exactingly, comparing ***old data*** to ***new. Folds*** and cracks in the ***ground***

were measured with laser accuracy; prismatic ***reflections*** from ***time-softened edges***

revealing subtle, ***often hidden geometries. The contrast level between*** the ground ***and***

the sky ***was recorded and compared*** with previous ***data. Molecules*** adrift in the thin

air were captured, analysed, interpreted.

The HumAnt — not quite an ***animal, nor*** quite a machine — could not ***feel. The***

concept of intuition ***was as alien to*** it as the ***endless, unbroken*** skin of ***the world*** on which it had been born. And yet it could formulate ***theories. Pose*** questions. In ***some***

peculiar, dimly understood way it could ***theorise.***

Something was wrong with ***the sky.***

It happened suddenly.

The sun, already ***bloated, swelled to bursting*** point, then rapidly collapsed,

„flinging off great sheets of its dying photosphere. ***For time inconceivable the*** Earth

bad waited. Now, in the first ***seconds*** of this ***great convulsion*** it ***vanished,*** unable to withstand ***even*** the slightest touch of ***the unimaginable forces ranged against it.***

The HumAnt, ***however, and millions like*** it, ***remained; a never-before-seen species***

with hitherto unexplored properties and abilities, glass-gossamer wings filled by ***the***

last breath of a dying sun, ***borne aloft like seeds*** into ***a new*** home, the *eternal* black **of *space.***

Mars

Trevor Baxendale

An *Adventure of the* First *Doctor,*

with Steven Taylor and Vicki

Steven Taylor *is going to* die on Mars.

That was a fact, thought Vicki. Just like Mars is *the* fourth planet from the Sun. Fact.

Vicki turned away from the observation port, unable to look at the

wretched planet a second longer. Even when she closed her eyes, she

could still see the blotchy red surface.

The Doctor stood immobile, his features hewn from stone as he faced

the porthole. His hawkish gaze was reflected with mirror-sharpness in

the glass. His piercing eyes were fixed on Mars, as if he could save his best friend's life by sheer force of will. A small vein throbbed at his temple.

Vicki reached out and touched his arm gently. The old man started,

suddenly old and frail as he looked at her.

Ìsn't there anything we can do, Doctor?' Vicki asked in a small voice.

She wasn't a child any more, although she felt like one now. Helpless and

uncertain, utterly reliant on the adults around her.

The Doctor's nostrils flared and he patted her hand, encouraging her to

keep it on his arm. 'My dear,' he began, and his voice was gruff with

emotion, 'I don't know. I just don't know.'

Vicki squeezed his arm, thin and bony beneath the soft fabric of his

black jacket. He responded with a tight, quick smile that didn't reach his

eyes. Normally, the Doctor's eyes twinkled like stars. Now they were

cloudy, grey and hooded.

Vicki had never seen such hopelessness in the Doctor, and she felt giddy

with worry. She had known him for a long time, and he had always treated her with grandfatherly affection, always ready to solve a problem or shush

away fears.

But now he looked haunted, almost helpless; it had reduced him to a

gaunt, white-haired old man rather than the energetic, quick-tempered

scientist she thought she knew.

`Maybe he's all right,' she blurted out. 'Maybe he's still alive!'

A thunderously black look descended on the Doctor's features. 'He's

rash, hot-headed young fool!' he spat. 'Look at all the worry he's

causing!' He stiffened, sucking in his hollow cheeks, returning his gaze to

the planet below. 'I sincerely hope you're right, Vicki, my child,' he

replied, with much less anger. 'I sincerely hope so!' But the tone of his

voice suggested that he could not, would not, allow himself to believe it.

The ship had come in too fast and too steep, that was the problem. There

hadn't been much that Steven could do about that; the controls had fused

when the power-banks in the engine compartment had gone into

meltdown. He was lucky to have got the ship down at all, and not simply

exploded over the Valles Marineres like a cheap firework. A frantic, last-

minute tussle with the controls had succeeded in clearing the canyon —

just. He had to be thankful for that, as well. The one-way trip to the

bottom of the giant equatorial gorge would have turned it into a six

kilometre-deep grave.

The ship carved its way into the dusty red surface of Mars, leaving a faint

scar that would probably never be noticed. The vessel hit a rock and

flipped end over end before slamming to a stop, throwing Steven against

the bulkhead with enough force to loosen his teeth. He slid down the

curvature of the interior cabin wall, dizzy and sick, with bright black spots bursting in his vision. He didn't allow himself any time to check if his

spacesuit had been torn; if it had been ruptured he'd have been dead

before he knew about it. He simply crawled as quickly as he could — which

was actually very slowly — to the passenger seat and fumbled with the

latches on Hazam's safety harness. Steven had been so busy arguing with

the alien about fastening the damn thing that he had forgotten his own.

Hazam was unconscious, thankfully. Steven lifted him out of the chair

and dragged him along the buckled deck. There were wires hanging down

from the control panels, sparks flashing everywhere, smoke filling the

cabin. Dimly, just above the sound of his own ragged breathing, Steven

could hear alarm klaxons.

He pulled the emergency release on the door hatch and the explosive

bolts made it jerk slightly. The fuselage was so twisted that the door was

virtually jammed, and it took a couple of hefty kicks to open it wide

enough to get out. He pulled Hazam after him and then dragged his dead

weight as far from the wreck as possible before he collapsed. Panting with

the effort, Steven looked up and saw that he had made forty, possibly fifty

metres. Not far enough.

He climbed to his feet, grabbed hold of Hazam beneath the armpits,

and hauled. By the time he'd got far enough away to be nearly

unconscious with the exertion, the ship's tiny reactor finally blew. A blue-

white star of energy flickered through the swirling dust, blinding Steven

for precious seconds before the shock wave dumped him painfully on his

backside.

* * *

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Vicki bit her lip and blinked away tears that were threatening to blur her view of Mars. From this distance, the planet looked like

a huge muddy-red disc in the darkness, so close she could see every crack and crater. She

wondered whether, if she stared hard enough, she would be able to make

out the crash site with the naked eye. It wasn't impossible; the explosion would certainly have been visible, perhaps nothing more than

a momentary speck of light, but still visible. But afterwards — what? A

cloud of red dust on a red background? A new red pockmark in a sea of

red craters?

The Doctor's eyes were also locked onto the planetary surface. His lips

were pursed in thought, and Vicki knew that, although he only appeared

to be concentrating on locating the crashed ship by sight, his astounding brain was actually calculating the remote possibilities of Steven's survival.

But Vicki didn't like the way in which the Doctor's eyes had narrowed to

angry slits, as if Mars itself was now the Enemy; a new monster to be

fought.

Èxcuse me,' said a voice behind them.

They turned to see a grey-suited man waiting apologetically. He was

young, painfully so, and stared nervously at the Doctor.

`Well?' the old man demanded abruptly. 'What is it? Hmm?'

Às you know, we have sensors here which can scan the surface of Mars

with incredible accuracy...'

`Yes, yes, get on with it, boy!'

Vicki knew the Doctor's bad temper was the result of anxiety, but it *was*

no less ugly for that. The young technician quailed.

The sensors detected the explosion of the spacecraft as it crashed,' he

went on uneasily. 'It would have been impossible for anyone to survive

that.'

The Doctor sucked in his cheeks but said nothing. Vicki reached out

and grabbed his hand, surprised and deeply concerned when he squeezed

her hand tightly back. As if he was counting on her support. But what

could she do?

`Wait a minute,' the Doctor suddenly barked, and he snatched his hand

back, grasping the lapels of his jacket in a familiar gesture. 'What d'you mean, "It would have been..."? Eh?'

The technician blinked. 'The station scanners have been routinely

scanning for radio signals. Five minutes ago, we picked up the faint

transponder codes of two spacesuits... moving away from the crash site.'

The Doctor's hand leapt out and grabbed the youth's arm. 'My boy,

that's wonderful!'

`Steven's alive?' Vicki gasped.

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Ìt's possible,' the technician conceded feebly.

Ìt must be him,' the Doctor insisted. 'And his co-pilot! Why, this is

marvellous news! You should have told us sooner, young man, you really

should!'

`We've only just confirmed the scan. We didn't want to raise your hopes

before—'

`Before what? Launching a rescue mission? My boy, there isn't

a moment to lose!'

The technician hesitated, and the Doctor saw instantly that there was

something wrong. 'Well, what is it? Spit it out, boy!'

Ì think you'd better come with me,' he replied.

Hazam was alive but injured. Badly. Steven suspected a broken arm at

least, but he guessed there could be ribs fractured and possible internal

bleeding. The alien physiognomy was similar enough to that of a human

for Steven to make an educated guess. There could even be spinal

damage. He'd *seen* injuries like this in the past, and knew what the possible outcome might be. In a war zone, he'd call for medical

evacuation. He tried the radio unit attached to his spacesuit helmet one

more time. Nothing but static. No chance of an evac ship, even if this had

been a war zone.

`We're on our own, Hazam,' he said aloud. Hazam took no notice. He was still unconscious, which was probably a good thing. If and when he woke up, the pain would hit big time.

Steven took the opportunity to examine the alien's face more closely. He could see it relatively clearly through the helmet visor: a sort of murky orange skin, glossy like a snake's, stretched over a bony skull with knobbly protuberances all over the cheek-bones and forehead. The eyes were closed, but Steven knew what they looked like — angry and red.

Steven clapped him gently on the helmet and said, 'You get some shut-eye, chum. I'll get us out of this mess. I got us into it, after all...'

They were enveloped in a heavy cloud of red dust, gritty little particles floating slowly down as the Martian gravity made a desultory attempt to bring them all back home. In the immediate vicinity, Steven could see rocks and boulders strewn around them. Typical desert. They were out in the open, exposed, nowhere near any kind of landmark. His Mars geography was sketchy at best, and Steven had absolutely no idea where they were. At a guess, he'd say somewhere in the southern hemisphere, between the equator and the polar ice cap. The Valles Marineres had flashed by so fast it could be hundreds of miles away. Useless.

He tried the radio again, but it was just white noise. That could either

mean damage to the electronics, or some kind of outside interference. An

approaching storm, for example.

'I am in pain.'

The voice crackled around inside his helmet, making him jump. He

twisted around and found Hazam's redcurrant eyes staring at him

accusingly. 'Hullo there,' he said, trying a smile. 'Back in the land of the living, I see.'

'I do not understand your cultural references,' replied Hazam. 'Please

do not use them in your speech.'

`Sony,' Steven said, feeling his heart sink. 'Old habits die hard.'

Hazam began to sit up, and then gasped. His mouth opened and

a black, bifurcated tongue flicked out with a gasp.

'I think you've broken your arm,' Steven told him. 'That's why you're in

pain. But the good news is that we survived the crash at all.'

`Good news?'

`Well, hopefully. If we can sit tight and wait for a rescue ship...'

`There will be no rescue ship.'

`You can't know that.'

Hazam looked at Steven with infuriating calmness. He seemed to have

mastered his pain already. 'I should never have come here at all,' he said bitterly. 'I am not welcome. Your people will not make

any attempt to...

rescue me.'

`Well, I did,' said Steven.

`You were a fool to try.'

`Thank you very much.'

Hazam's ruby eyes blinked slowly, or rather the nictitating eyelids slid

sideways as they regarded Steven for a long, cool moment. 'I do not

understand humans,' he said eventually.

`That's fine,' Steven replied. 'I understand you only too well.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning you're an ungrateful, arrogant little swine. I couldn't think of anyone I'd rather be shipwrecked with on Mars less.'

The helmet nodded. 'The feeling is mutual, human '

The Doctor and Vicki were escorted to the main command deck of the

space station. Technically, Vicki knew it was a lunar station — one of the old-style modules grafted onto a planet's moon to act as a forward base

and navigation aid. This one — Phobos Station — was also a relay point for traffic through the Solar System. It handled spaceship passage and signal beams to Earth, Mars, Jupiter's moons and the outer worlds. By Vicki's

standards it was cramped, clumsy and smelled of heavily filtered and

recycled air — but the Doctor had gone to great pains to point out that, for its time, Phobos Station was actually very advanced.

The technician led them to the commanding officer of Phobos Station,

a gruff-looking man with a scarred complexion and iron-grey hair. He

regarded the Doctor and Vicki with a steely glare as they approached.

Tugwell,' he announced brusquely. The Doctor hurriedly introduced

himself and Vicki, and Tugwell's thick brow furrowed as he took in the

Doctor's Edwardian clothes. 'Your friend's got himselfinto a whole heap of

trouble down there, Doc.' Tugwell's gaze flicked back to the huge viewing

screen that formed one wall of the command deck, showing much the

same view of Mars that Vicki had seen from the porthole. Then he turned

back to the Doctor. 'Any idea of what the hell he thought he was doing?'

`Never mind about that now, Commander,' said the Doctor. 'This young

man says you have some good news for us.'

Tugwell gave a curt nod. 'Transponder codes showed up against all the

odds. Looks like your pal got lucky.'

`Have you been able to establish contact with him?'

`No chance,' Tugwell grunted. 'Radio communication is out. There's

one hell of a storm brewing **down there and it's playing havoc.**'

Òh, dear, oh, dear.'

`You could say that.'

Tut will Steven *be all* right?' Vicki asked. 'I mean, he is still alive now...

will he be all right in this storm?'

`Miss, don't build your hopes up. The weather down there is

unpredictable and can be violent. Some storms can sweep clear across the

whole planet, and the temperature can drop by twenty degrees in a couple

of days. We've seen tornadoes eight kilometres high before now.'

Ànd is this storm a bad one?'

Ìt's looking ugly, Miss, I have to say.'

`Then we really have no time to lose,' the Doctor said. 'Commander

Tugboat, you must launch a rescue mission at once.'

`Tugwell. And I'm sorry, but a rescue mission is out of the question in

the current conditions. It's too dangerous.'

`Dangerous! A man's life is at stake, sir!'

`Your friend took a mighty big risk, Doc, and now he's paying the price.'

The Doctor glared. 'That is a very high-handed attitude to take,

Commander, if I might say so!'

`Say what you like. Your boy did a damn fool thing and this is the result.'

Tugwell returned the Doctor's angry look for a few seconds, and then

lowered his eyes. 'I'm sorry.'

* * *

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`The question is — what do we do now?'

Steven's voice had sounded hollow in the confines of his spacesuit

helmet, but Hazam's reply was only too clear: 'Die.'

Ì was thinking of something a little more positive.' Steven shuffled clumsy around and pointed a bulky finger toward the orange horizon.

`There's a storm coming. We need to find shelter.'

Hazam twisted around, scanning the rock-strewn desert. 'There is no shelter.'

`We have to move, at least. Try and get away.' Steven stood up, trying to reinforce his point. A huge cloud of angry red dust was growing in the sky, as dark and threatening as a blood clot.

`You are insane,' Hazam told him. 'You cannot outrun a storm.'

Ì'll give it a go,' Steven responded bullishly. 'Anything's better than waiting around here to die.'

Hazam slumped back into the dirt. 'Go, then.'

`Look, the sooner we get going the better! If we move, they might be able to track us. These spacesuits will have transponders. Someone on Phobos may have picked up the signal already.'

`That is irrelevant. They will not launch a rescue mission for me.'

Or me, thought Steven anxiously. The Doctor and Vicki would be out of their minds with worry, if they didn't think he'd already perished in the crash. But there would be little they could do to help. And Steven was completely unknown to any of the authorities on the lunar station, the only possible source of a rescue mission.

The storm was getting nearer. Steven could see great swathes of red

dust swirling around, whipping up clouds of sand like the bow wave of an

ocean liner. There was no sign of the horizon now; just a grimy blanket of

orange hanging in the sky.

Ì' m not going to just give up and die,' he insisted. 'Come on, I'll give

you a hand.'

`Let me ask you one thing first,' said Hazam. 'How much oxygen have

you left?'

Steven felt his heart jump at the question. It was exactly the thing he was

worrying about most. The spacesuits they wore were not designed for

long-term exploration. They were survival suits for use in an emergency,

or space-walking for simple repairs. When he had checked his suit's

wrist-mounted oxygen gauge just after the crash, it had shown him that

he had less than an hour's breathable air left.

And that was nearly r5 minutes ago.

The main door to the lunar station's command deck hummed open and a

tall, regal figure in a long blue gown entered. Practically everyone on the

deck turned and stared. The newcomer had an orange-yellow complexion

and a strangely shaped skull. Two large, ruby-coloured eyes scanned the

busy room and alighted on, firstly, the Doctor and then Tugwell.

Àmbassador Grys,' said Tugwell, and his tone suggested that he wasn't

at all pleased to see the new arrival.

À Jarnian!' muttered the Doctor quietly, watching the alien carefully.

His fingers and thumbs twitched with excited curiosity.

Vicki was surprised to see a Jarnian here. 'I thought this was early on in

mankind's exploration of space.'

`Relatively speaking, child, relatively speaking.' The Doctor's

inquisitive eyes burned, and yet Vicki could tell by the old man's agitated

body language that he was still thinking about Steven. But, being the

Doctor, he couldn't ignore something of interest. 'The Jamian Settlers

have only just been discovered in Earth's solar system, making their home

inside one of Saturn's satellites,' he explained in a hurried whisper.

`They're still something of a curiosity, no doubt.'

Vicki found it strange that what was to her relatively commonplace

should attract so many open stares. But the Jarnian female had already

reached Commander Tugwell, and was preparing to speak. Her voice was

soft but firm; a natural diplomat:

`Commander. Where is my son?'

`There's been a complication,' replied Tugwell. 'An accident. The ship

on which your son was travelling... developed a fault.'

`Fault? What has happened? Is Hazam all right?' This time the

diplomatic tones were undercut by maternal anxiety.

`We don't know if he's all right,' Tugwell said bluntly. 'There was

a rescue attempt, but the rescue ship has crashed on Mars.'

`Crashed!'

`There are two survivors. Or at least, there were a few minutes ago.

We've lost contact.'

Ì don't understand...'

`Perhaps I can explain, madam,' interrupted the Doctor. He had

straightened up, and, with a disparaging glance at Tugwell, affected

a brief, comforting smile for the benefit of Ambassador Grys. 'My friends

and I were, um, passing through when we heard that your son's

spaceship, en route to Phobos Station, had developed serious engine

trouble. My friend Steven Taylor, a qualified and experienced pilot,

answered the distress signal. He flew out and collected your son in a small

two-man rescue ship, but your son's own vessel exploded and forced

Steven's ship down onto the planet below.'

Ambassador Grys looked from the Doctor to Tugwell and back again.

Vicki had the distinct impression that she could scarcely believe her ears

or at least the gill-like slits positioned on either side of her knobbly

skull.

'Is this true?' she demanded.

'I'm afraid so,' Tugwell confirmed uneasily.

`Madam, your son and my friend both appear to have survived the crash-

landing,' said the Doctor. 'That is the good news, as it were. The not-so-

good news is that Commander Toggle here has been unable to make

contact with them.'

Grys looked stricken. 'This is awful!'

`We're doing everything in our power — ' Tugwell began, only to be

interrupted by the Doctor.

'You're doing nothing of the kind, sir!' The Doctor drew himself up

straight and glared at the commander, his suppressed fury finally boiling

over. 'And if your men had reacted more quickly in the first place, Steven

would never have been placed in such danger.'

Ì don't understand,' said Grys.

Vicki said, 'Steven knew that your son didn't have very long before his

ship would blow up. None of the other pilots here seemed aware of the

danger. So Steven commandeered one of the rescue ships and went off on

his own to save your son.'

'A very brave human being,' Grys acknowledged graciously.

'Brave to the point of foolhardy,' muttered the Doctor. 'But thank you.'

`Clearly, I am in your friend's debt,' Grys replied.

`No, madam,' the Doctor spoke grimly. 'You are indebted to no one. It

Is entirely possible that Steven and, er, Hazam may yet perish.'

'We have lost radio contact with them,' Tugwell said, seeking to regain control of the conversation, 'because of a particularly violent storm developing in the area of the crash site on Mars. Unfortunately,' he added with deliberate emphasis and a sharp look at the Doctor, 'this also prevents me from launching an official rescue mission. It is simply too dangerous.'

The Doctor huffed and Vicki felt the familiar twist of anxiety in her stomach. Ambassador Grys simply turned her eyes towards the command deck's main viewing screen, and its spectacular view of Mars.

'Come on, Hazam, you ungrateful sod,' yelled Steven. 'Get up!'

Steven bent down — not easy in the cumbersome survival suit, and tried to grip the Jarnian under his arms. But Hazam was having none of it; he twisted and turned and made it impossible for Steven to get a decent grip.

`Hazam, why are you doing this?' Steven gasped. 'That storm's going to hit any second, and we've got to move!'

Ì never asked to be rescued,' Hazam said, his voice faint in Steven's helmet radio.

`What d'you mean? You were sending out a distress signal. The TARDIS homed in on it — *well,* as near as dammit.'

The distress signal was automated.'

`Your ion drive was about to turn into a fusion bomb.'

`Then you were a fool to come after me.'

`So it would seem!' Steven twisted around to look at the storm. He saw

a mountainous red vortex towering over them. There were dust streams

everywhere; even Hazam was growing fainter, not just in the helmet radio

but visibly. 'Get up, damn you! I'm not risking my life for nothing.' He

bent down and grabbed Hazam under the arms, and although the Jamian

tried to resist, Steven found that he was in fact too weak to put up a real

fight. Or else the proximity of the sand storm was lending Steven

a desperate strength born of sheer terror.

Steven dragged and pulled the young alien after him, and after a few

moments Hazam's legs began to work. Together they stumbled away, into

the fog of red dust. But a few paces further on, Hazam collapsed heavily

into the dirt, face down, pulling Steven over with him.

`Come on,' Steven shouted as he scrambled back to his feet, 'we can do it!'

He tried to turn Hazam over, but the alien was a dead weight. For

a second Steven thought he actually was dead, but there was a glimmer of

light between the eyelids and the indicator LEDs on the Jamian's

spacesuit were still blinking green and blue. Alive — but for how much

longer?

Steven felt the approach of the storm: he could sense the ground quivering beneath his boots, feel the pressure of the wind against the thick hide of his spacesuit. Small rocks and splinters bounced off his helmet like hailstones.

`Go on without me,' said Hazam. His voice crackled faintly in Steven's ears, the storm wreaking havoc with the comms signal.

It was tempting. For a long moment, Steven felt the pull of his natural instinct for self-preservation. Run! Run for your lift!

But then he thought of the Doctor and Vicki. The old man's bright, intelligent eyes and indomitable will.

Ì'm here to rescue you,' Steven said thickly. 'Or die trying.'

`We had them for a moment,' said the technician. 'Just then: look.' He pointed at the monitor, where a number of gauges were flickering. Bright

specks of light danced around oscilloscope screens. None of it made sense to Vicki, but the Doctor peered at the instruments with intense interest through a pair of small wire-framed spectacles.

`Yes! Yes, I do believe you're right!' He tapped one of the monitors with

a long finger. 'These are the separate traces for the spacesuit radios, I take **It?** Hmm!'

`You've made contact again?' asked Vicki, struggling to understand.

`We can't make contact with them,' said the technician. 'Too much interference. But that was definitely the transponder signal codes.'

`Was?'

`We lost them again, almost immediately.'

`No!'

`Now, now, Vicki my child, don't upset yourself,' the Doctor chided. 'At

least it means that both Steven and Hazam are still alive!'

`But for how long?'

Tugwell leaned over the communications station, his face sombre. 'The

storm's getting worse. Flying a ship down to the surface would be

impossible.'

The Doctor straightened up and removed his glasses. 'I understand

your dilemma, Commander, I really do. But we cannot simply sit back and

watch as those two young lives are extinguished, can we?'

Ì don't know what else we can do.'

`We should at least try to make contact. If I know Steven, he will be

doing everything he can to stay alive. We must try and establish some kind **of** communication.'

Ìt's not possible, Doctor. The atmospheric conditions...'

Àre too volatile, yes, I know. Direct radio contact is impossible. But the

fact that we can pick up the spacesuit signals here means that we can send **a signal back.'**

`What kind of signal?'

Ànything! Do you know Morse code, commander?'

`No.'

The Doctor's displeasure was obvious. 'Oh, really, commander!'

Vicki said, 'It's a series of long and short signals in various

combinations used to represent letters of the alphabet. It was invented

=tunes ago by — '

`Yes, yes, thank you, child! It doesn't matter. Any regular signal that

could be picked up by Steven will be enough to tell him that we're here **—**

and that we're trying to think of a way to mount a rescue.'

communications

There was a short silence, punctuated only by the hiss and crackle of the

console. The static seemed to mock the Doctor's

hopeful tone, but there was a simple desperation in his voice that no one

dared to question.

Àll right, do it,' Tugwell ordered, and the technician began to operate

the controls. 'We might as well try.'

The Doctor turned away from the communications console, deep in

thought. Vicki caught a glimpse of dark fear in his eyes, just before

Ambassador Grys joined them and the Doctor instantly switched to an

attitude of brisk confidence. Àh, there you are, Ambassador...'

`Have you found them? Are they all right?' Grys asked.

The Doctor nodded. 'They've established contact, but it's intermittent.

I'm afraid the weather is against us, Ambassador.'

Grys turned to look at the red planet. 'It looks so beautiful.'

`Mars boasts some of the most spectacular scenery in the Solar System, madam. Giant canyons, massive volcanoes and mountain ranges. Truly spectacular. The southern hemisphere, as you can see, is particularly rugged — that is noticeable even from here, 6,000 kilometres away.'

`Have you visited Mars yourself, Doctor?'

`Many times.' The Doctor grasped his lapels, restlessly tapping his thumbs against the material. 'It is a fantastic and beautiful world — but treacherous. Very treacherous.'

`You're a fool,' gasped Hazam as he stumbled through the swirling dust.

Steven was holding him upright, or at least trying to, but the wind was so strong that he found he was clinging onto the Jarnian for support.

Hazam's legs kept twisting beneath him, threatening to bring them both down yet, by the simple tactic of dogged persistence, Steven had managed to keep them both upright and moving.

The problem was, he couldn't tell where they were moving to. 'I'm a blind fool,' he told Hazam testily. 'The dust... it's terrible! I can't see a thing.'

A chip of red stone hit the back of his helmet with a loud crack, making his heart leap with shock. Hazam staggered and the pair of them suddenly found themselves floundering. Steven lost his grip on the Jarnian and they

separated. Steven made a wild lunge through the red fog in the direction

he thought Hazam had toppled, landed on top of him and rolled *over.* For a long moment Steven lay where he was, utterly unable to move. He

kidded himself that he was merely allowing himself the luxury of a few

seconds' rest, but then the panic started to set in. His breath was a loud,

heaving rasp in his own ears and he could feel his heart pounding.

He felt Hazam moving weakly beside him, and, with a supreme effort,

Steven heaved himself up onto his knees. Why did he feel so heavy? The

Martian gravity was less than that of Earth, but everything now seemed

Iclaustrophobic ke such an effort. He could hardly catch his breath, and felt suddenly in the survival suit helmet. Calm *down,* he told himself. He

[led to recall some of his military training, something that would help,

it his mind was a blank. All he could hear was his own hard breathing

Ind the thud of the blood in his head. There were black patches in his

*

seem don. I *never faint,* he thought savagely. Never. Well, hardly ever. He did TARDIS

to remember once, when he had first wandered aboard the Doctor's

, that he'd come over a bit dizzy. Only to be expected, that But

the

memory made him think of the Doctor again. And as his vision began to

Leak up into unpleasant patches of red and grey, Steven fixed his mind's

Ike

Intelligence

on the Doctor: on the old man's damnably clear eyes, the razor-sharp

lurking behind the ancient façade. The crafty smirk forever

on the edge of his grim mouth. What *are* you *doing there, lying down on the*

hoof like that, boy, hmm? Get up, *for goodness'* sake, and stop making such a fuss !

Steven hauled his boot up beneath him, dragging it through the red dirt

pia he could force himselfonto his feet. The wind was howling, he could

'ear it through the helmet, hear the clatter of small stones hitting the thin M

himself etal shell, driven by a wind that could flatten him if he didn't brace against it all the time.

His vision started to clear, fuzzy blackness giving way to the swirling

cadet of a Martian sandstorm. He gradually brought his breathing back

'under

control. He still felt heavy, every limb a dead weight, but now he

eusing ased the gravity hadn't changed; *he* had. He'd been hyperventilating, up his oxygen at a lunatic rate.

He didn't dare try to look at his oxygen gauge.

'Come on,' he told Hazam's inert form, shocked at how weak and

wobbly his voice sounded. 'We're not... beaten... yet.'

Amazingly, fantastically, the Jarnian actually stirred. Steven helped him op and their helmets clacked together. 'Shelter,' Steven gasped. 'Must...

W... shelter!'

The two of them, leaning against each other, forced their way into the

'liaison maelstrom.

this is intolerable!' bellowed the Doctor, white hair shaking in outrage.

How can I be expected to work with such primitive instruments! Hm?

m?'

The Phobos Station technician quivered beneath the old man's fierce

tare. 'This is the best we have,' he stammered, and the Doctor snorted.

she He certainly looked to be at his most fearsome, and Vicki had to smile.

felt sorry for the poor technician; it really wasn't his fault, but the

Doctor had been growing more and more frustrated with the

communications equipment. Compared with the TARDIS, the lunar

station was woefully outmoded.

`What is wrong?' asked Ambassador Grys.

`They're still trying to make contact with Steven and Hazam,' explained

Vicki. 'I think the bad weather is getting in the way, and the Doctor's

blaming his tools like a poor craftsman.'

Ìntolerable!' they heard an angry bellow from across the room.

Commander Tugwell had had enough. Shaking his head, he walked

away from the Doctor and approached Grys. 'It's not looking good,' he

said. 'We can't get through. Or at least, we might have — but there's no

way we can tell.'

Ìf Steven and Hazam are wearing spacesuits,' Vicki said, 'how long will

it be before their oxygen runs out?'

Ìt's not easy to tell. It depends how quickly they use it up. They'll be

struggling in stormy conditions, and that isn't good.'

`Surely it's worth going down there,' Vicki insisted. 'Fly a ship down, at

least try to rescue them.'

Tugwell shook his head. 'Out of the question, miss. It'd be a suicide

mission in that weather. I can't order my men to their deaths; what would

be the point of wasting more lives?'

`There must be something we can do!'

Ì think your Doctor pal is doing his best.' There was just a hint of irony

in Tugwell's voice, as the Doctor's fuming complaints echoed around the

control deck.

`My son is going to die,' said Grys heavily. 'I must prepare myself.'

`No,' Vicki said. 'No, you can't think like that, you mustn't. Not yet! The

Doctor will think of something, I know he will!'

But when she looked across the room, Vicki saw the old man walking

away from the comms station with a sad shake ofhis head. All ofa sudden

he looked fragile *again.* He sat down slowly on a stool and grasped his knees, hunched over, beaten.

Vicki ran to him 'Doctor?'

Òh, my child... it's no use. No use at all.'

She crouched down and held his cold hands. 'Don't speak like that.

Don't give up! It's not like you, Doctor.'

He tried a smile, but it wouldn't have convinced anyone. 'Vicki, my dear.

I'm so very sorry. We must face the worst, you know. We must.'

`That's what Grys said, and I won't believe it.'

He put his arm around her shoulders. 'That storm down there, child, is

like nothing you can imagine. Its force is deadly. And Steven has only

a limited amount of oxygen in that spacesuit of his. We can't even make

contact with him, let alone reach him. I'm sorry, my dear.' His voice grew thick with concern. 'I'm so sorry.'

`But what about the TARDIS? Surely we could—'

The Doctor winced as if in sudden pain, screwing his eyes shut as Vicki

spoke. He shook his head emphatically. `No, Vicki. No. We

cannot. That

f. old Ship of mine... is not what it could be. It won't... I can't... '

Vicki wasn't sure if the Doctor was blaming the TARDIS, or himself, or

both. But she could see that even talking about it, even considering the

idea of using the TARDIS to rescue Steven, caused him huge distress.

Ì only wish...' he muttered. 'Perhaps one day... perhaps one day...'

Vicki felt tears filling her eyes again. The fact that they possessed a ship 1 that could travel anywhere in time and place, visit any planet in any galaxy

and any period in history, should have been a wonder. But now it felt like a curse, because they had no control over such a wonderful vessel, no

control whatsoever. Not even what it looked like: a stupid, stupid old

police box. Vicki hated it.

The Doctor looked down at her and saw the torment in her eyes. He

brushed away a tear with a thumb and said, 'Don't blame the TARDIS, my

child. If you must blame someone, then let it be me. I'm the silly old fool who brought you both here, and travels around the universe in a useless

old ship.'

Vicki had never heard the Doctor talk about the TARDIS in such a way.

He had never been disparaging about the Ship before. Frustrated,

certainly, ludicrously proud, often, fearsomely protective,

always. But

never angry. She realised just how upset and worried he must be over

Steven to feel like that about the TARDIS.

She sniffed and smudged away her tears. 'I'm sorry, Doctor. I didn't

!t mean to upset you. It's not your fault. I just... I just can't bear to think of I Steven down there, all alone.'

`But he isn't alone, child. Hazam is with him.' The Doctor straightened

up, instantly alert. 'Yes, he has Hazam with him...'

Vicki searched desperately for a grain of hope in the desert of

possibilities, but it was useless. And yet the Doctor seemed reinvigorated.

`What do you mean?'

`Steven won't just give up. He won't give up if there's someone else

down there with him,' the Doctor said. 'And neither must we, Vicki!

Neither must we!'

Steven was now having to drag Hazam through the Martian dirt. It was

hard going. He felt weak, lost and very alone. And the more he exerted

himself, the more oxygen he used. He'd just checked his wrist gauge and

now he was down to less than twenty minutes of air left. Twenty minutes!

There was little chance of a rescue now. He didn't like to think the Doctor

had forgotten him, or was unable to help... but how long would the old

man give him? Had he already decided that Steven was dead? Had the

TARDIS already dematerialised from Phobos Station? The Doctor and

Vicki could already be on the other side of the universe, a thousand years

away.

But he couldn't think like that. If he thought for one moment that the

Doctor wasn't trying to mount a rescue, then he knew a surge of anger,

fuelled by terror, would engulf his mind. At the moment *he* was fighting the fear by staying active, keeping moving. *Kidding myself I'm going* to *make* it.

Hazam wasn't helping. Steven couldn't tell if the Jarnian was just

playing dead to avoid having to walk. It was a nasty thought, but things

like that kept popping into his head. 'Damn it, Hazam,' he growled

through gritted teeth. 'I hope you're not faking it just to save oxygen.'

Then he tripped over a rock and fell his length in the swirling red dust.

He lay there and breathed heavily for a minute. Hazam, he noticed with

a sneer, was stirring again.

`Your turn,' he panted. Hazam levered himself up and stared at Steven

through the mist. 'You're going to have to carry me now,' Steven

elaborated.

`We are both going to die here,' Hazam said. 'Why do you fight the inevitable?'

Steven regarded him dolefully. 'Hindsight. Inevitable is something that has happened. Not something that's going to happen.'

`Semantics.'

`Same to you.'

They sat and listened to the wind howl and the grit scratching their helmets.

`We will die from asphyxiation soon,' Hazam said.

Steven just nodded. He didn't have the puff for anything else.

`Before that happens,' Hazam went on, 'I intend to remove my helmet. I would prefer a swift death.'

And I'll *be* happy to help, Steven thought viciously. 'Don't be ridiculous,'

he said. 'You've got ages left. I've been the one using up all the oxygen.'

Ìt was your idea to look for shelter.'

Àt least I had an idea.' Steven had had enough of arguing. He climbed slowly and unsteadily to his feet, panting for breath even after such a basic manoeuvre. 'I don't intend... to stop trying... either.'

As he straightened up, a stray fragment of flying rock struck the faceplate of his helmet. The plastic cracked, a spray ofwhite lines opening like a starburst right in front of his eyes. Instantly, oxygen began to leak out. A great breath of air was cruelly stolen by the wind and Steven's mind went into panic overdrive.

He was aware that he had fallen over again, rearing back from the

hissing fissure as if it was a live, poisonous thing inside his helmet. He scrabbled at the faceplate with his gloves, but there was nothing he could do. The cracks spread and the air, the precious air, his *life,* was haemorrhaging uncontrollably.

His eyes were wide open, staring madly upwards into the hurricane.

A shadow appeared, another helmet, and then he caught a glimpse of

Hazam's burning gaze. Then the Jamian's glove, pressing down on his

visor. Oh, no, thought Steven, *he's going* to push the *whole thing in. He's trying*

to kill me.

Which was stupid, because he was dying anyway. Neither of them had

much longer left now. Maybe Hazam was just trying to offer him a quick

death. Steven knew he should fight it, he should flail around, throw the Mien off, but he was paralysed with fear. All he could do was lie there like an idiot, listening to the heavy thud of his heart and the inexorable,

mocking hiss of his escaping oxygen.

Abruptly the sound stopped.

Steven, nearly overcome with nausea, began to gasp for breath.

Somehow Hazam had fixed the crack. Steven forced himself to focus. The

Jarman waved something in the air, and Steven dimly recognised it as

a sachet of water. Empty. And there was a film of ice across his helmet

visor, distorting his vision. Hazam had plugged the leak with water,

which had turned to ice in the freezing temperature.

He took another breath and laughed weakly. Hazam let the wind snatch

away **the empty water sachet and then lay next to Steven in the sand, both pf them exhausted, unable to move.**

We're going **to die** ***here,*** **thought Steven. But not yet.**

ft **want a ship,' the Doctor said to Tugwell. 'There's nothing else for it, Commander. We need to conduct a low-level search of the region.'**

`Do you realise what you're asking?' Tugwell demanded. 'You're

Insane.'

p **The Doctor grasped the other man's arm with surprising strength. 'I'll fly the ship myself if I have to.'**

The commander looked at the old man with a mixture of admiration

and pity. 'No can do, Doc. You know that. That storm's getting worse, if

anything. Face it: your pal and his mate are most likely dead. I'm real

sorry.'

Ànd if that is the case,' said the Doctor with great dignity, 'then I wish

to recover their bodies. It is the very least I can do.'

Ì will not leave Hazam's bones to decay in the Martian soil,' said

Ambassador Grys. She stood shoulder to shoulder with the Doctor as they

faced Tugwell. 'But I do not even know yet if he is dead.'

`Believe me, he is,' Tugwell said.

Ì would *prefer* to believe my own eyes. This is my son we are talking

about.'

`Yes,' agreed the Doctor. 'And for that matter, Steven might as well be

my son. I couldn't care for him any more if he was. I have a duty of care to that boy, sir, and I will carry out that duty. I would not leave my own flesh and blood to die on that planet! I will not!'

Vicki wanted to cheer, but Tugwell was regarding the pair of them

balefully.

`Now, sir,' said the Doctor. 'A ship, ifyou please. I can pilot it myself.'

`What, you?'

Ìndeed! What, do you think I'm a decrepit old fool just because my

hair's gone white and I use a stick?' The Doctor glared imperiously at the

commander, who visibly wilted. 'I was climbing in and out of spaceships

before you were born, my boy!'

Tugwell took a deep breath. 'You are asking too much, Doctor. I can't

risk more lives.'

`My life is not yours to risk.'

Òr mine,' said Ambassador Grys.

Òr mine, for that matter,' Vicki said. Ìf it's any help, I'm with the

Doctor - all the way.'

They were coming for him. Steven was just starting to realise that. He lay on the rocky ground with Hazam, letting the wind buffet them and the flying

sand scour their spacesuits, and kept a careful watch. Somewhere in the

swirling mass of red dust, he'd *seen* them. Shapes. Bulky, purposeful, impervious to the raging elements. Coming towards them.

`Hazam,' he said weakly, lifting a heavy hand to touch the Jarnian.

Ì think I'm hallucinating.'

After a while, Hazam whispered his reply: 'You are dying.'

Steven thought about this. His oxygen was pretty well gone. His helmet

stank of stale sweat and fear and carbon dioxide. No wonder he was

seeing things. 'What.- about-you?' he managed to ask.

Ì am already dead,' Hazam said.

Now **I really am losing** it, Steven thought. In truth, he couldn't see anything properly. The cracks in his helmet visor and the ice smeared over

it prevented him from seeing clearly. But if he concentrated, forced his tired eyes to focus on whatever lay behind the visor... He peered into the

wind-blown sands, trying to pierce the gritty clouds with vision that was

already failing. The shapes were still there — drawing closer, closer. Tall

and domineering. Life threatening. Lying here like this, waiting to breathe

his last breath, he didn't have a chance. L

on Mars, he thought. There had

been a time, long ago in Earth's history, when such a thing was regarded

as romantic speculation. Which just went to show, Steven considered, that

you should never underestimate the power of the imagination.

He tried to imagine what dying was going to be like. His vision

clouding, darkening, decreasing to an impersonal, black nothingness

before consciousness finally faded? Or a bright, white light waiting for

him at the end of a tunnel? He'd find out soon enough. He only hoped he

died before the Martians got him.

The dark shapes drew closer. He blinked, involuntarily, and they

disappeared for a minute. Phantoms.

It was getting too difficult to breathe properly now. He didn't even have

the strength to look at his wrist gauge, but he could guess what it said:

zero. Probably a couple of flashing red warning lights, too. Just to

underline the point. Zero oxygen left. All gone. Over. Dead.

He tried to draw a breath; he wanted a deep, deep breath, but there was

nothing there. He sucked in nothing. His mouth and throat were dry.

`Hazam?'

No reply.

`Hazam?' Steven's voice was no more than a desiccated cough, but

surely the Jarman would hear him? Surely he would respond, now, at the

very end? He would live longer than *Steven,* he had to, because Steven had done so much to keep him alive, to save his life. He'd used up his own air

doing that. The least the alien could do was respond.

`Hazam?' Steven peered at the dark shape lying in the soil next to him.

Red sand dusted the bulky spacesuit. Steven reached out, touched him,

but there was nothing. He was gone.

Steven sank back, wanting to cry but not finding the energy. He lay still,

not even breathing any more, and stared up through the milky visor at the

Martian sky: little more than a blanket of dark, red dust now. He saw the

beginning of a bright, white light forming and knew then that he had his

answer.

He heard the helmet seals unlocking first, and then felt warm, fresh air on 97

his face. The effect was electric. Steven jerked awake, lungs heaving,

unable to get enough oxygen into his system. He had a blinding headache,

and *every* part of him hurt. He could hear people talking, saying things like, 'oxygen starvation', and 'hyperventilating', and, 'hold him down'.

And then, wonderfully, his name, shouted in a familiar voice: 'Steven!

Steven my boy!'

He blinked open his eyes, but at first all he could see was a painfully

bright glare. Blurs moved through the brightness, slowly resolving into

shapes and then people. There was someone he didn't recognise, and

then Vicki, beaming at him with tears in her eyes, and, of course, the

Doctor.

'Give him some room, and stop fussing, for heaven's sake,' the old man

grumbled, batting away the medic who was busy trying to test Steven's

blood pressure. 'Now then, my boy, let's have a look at you.' The Doctor's

critical gaze swept over Steven's face, assessing the damage. 'You've led us all a merry dance, young man! Oh, yes indeed!' There was chastisement in

his voice, but Steven didn't care. 'Look at all the trouble you've caused!'

But even as the old man admonished him, Steven could feel the cool,

tight grip of his hand. There was a wealth of relief and concern beneath

that veneer of annoyance.

'We thought you were dead!' Vicki gabbled excitedly. 'Oh, Steven, we

were so worried! The Doctor was —'

'Now now, child, never mind about all that. Steven doesn't want to hear

all the ins and outs.'

'We only just found you in time,' Vicki said. 'We had to fly down here in

a storm. It's been awful!'

Now Steven could feel the irregular movement of a spaceship being

buffeted by strong atmospherics. He was lying on a medical couch, and

the equipment was rattling and shaking around him. He twisted his head

around and caught a glimpse of a red dawn through the porthole. That

gave way in an instant to the cold blackness of space and the turbulence

ceased. Escape velocity. They were clear of the planet. Mars was a memory.

'Commander Tugwell is at the helm,' explained the Doctor, reading

Steven's thoughts. 'He wouldn't risk any of his own pilots in such

a foolhardy escapade. But something made him try it himself.'

Vicki mouthed, 'The Doctor!' behind the old man's back and grinned.

Ignoring the surging nausea in his gut, Steven pushed himself up off

the couch and staggered across the cabin to where a tall Jamian woman

was bent over another bed. He could feel the hands of his friends clawing

at him, pulling him back, urging him to lie down and rest, but he shook

them off and leant heavily against the edge of the medical couch.

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There was a prone figure in a spacesuit lying there. The helmet had

been removed and Hazam's face was deathly still under the flat

illumination of the cabin lights.

Ìs he alive?' Steven asked hoarsely.

Hazam's eyes opened fractionally, little glimmers of red beneath the

lids. They regarded Steven for a long moment, perhaps trying to focus.

Then the Jarman raised an arm and clasped Steven's hand firmly.

`Thank you,' he whispered.

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Jupiter

Andy Russell

An *Adventure of the* Sixth Doctor,

with Euelyn Smythe

`Captain?'

The rich dark voice barely registered. She was out there, amidst

the

burnt orange clouds, her mind on an altogether higher plane.

—You know I love you? —

— *Of course I do* -

- Do you still trust me? -

- Do you *need* to ask? -

- Not really -

- *Good* —

—*Will you follow me, Norma? Come* what may? -

- To *the other side* of eternity, my *love* —

`Captain?'

A soft chuckle tickling at the back of her consciousness receded further

Into obscurity, replaced by the ever-present rumble that was the

soundtrack to her daily life. Norma Kelligan blinked rapidly, making

a concerted effort to drag herself back to reality. As her vision *cleared,* the face of her first officer, David Nkoto, swam before her refocusing eyes, a look of quizzical concern etched into his perfectly sculpted ebony

features.

`Captain,' he insisted, 'if we are to launch, it has to be now.'

Metaphorically planting her size fives firmly on the ground, Norma felt

the comforting vibrations passing from the deck plates and shuddering

up through her body. She became aware of her surroundings: the control

banks and monitor screens, gauges and flickering lights of the command

deck. Her eyes slid from David's worried expression to settle momentarily on the wiry frame of her helmsman, Robbie MacKenzie. The red-haired

Scot had twisted in his seat and was studying her, one eyebrow raised

challengingly.

`So let's get on with it,' she snapped, instantly reasserting her authority.

Ìf you could keep at least one eye on the helm, Mr MacKenzie, I'm sure

a steady course would make things easier for all of us.'

As she strode across to the launch system console, Norma was gratified

to see Robbie turn shamefacedly back to the navigation controls

universally referred to as the helm in deference to the generations of

mariners who had instituted traditions on Earth's oceans that were still

adhered to by those who sailed the spaceways of her ever-expanding

empire. She was even more pleased by the almost imperceptible smile

that passed across David Nkoto's face as he slipped into the launch

control seat. She stood beside him, hands clasped behind her back as he

operated the intercom.

`Command to refinery. You there, Koop?'

`*Where* der hell else would I be?' the curiously melodic Dutch voice of Hendryk Koopmaan crackled back. 'I have a cargo thruster full of

helium

powered up and ready to fly. And if we don't launch soon, we miss the orbiter.'

Àll right, Koop,' soothed Norma, leaning towards the microphone. 'If you've done your job right, you can leave us to worry about the calculations.' She flicked the intercom switch before Koopmaan had a chance to launch into his habitual invective against the perceived inefficiencies of the management.

She nodded to David who punched his security code into the control console before hitting the large red button that would send the cargo thruster on its way.

Moments later, the scanners picked up the image of the thruster as it climbed steadily up through the broiling storm clouds of Jupiter's turbulent atmosphere. Once in free space, the thruster and its cargo of refined gas would be collected by one of the automated freighters that orbited high above the planet and, eventually, delivered to the Corporation storage facility on Europa.

As she watched the thruster's progress on the image screen, Norma noticed a subtle change in the vibrations beneath her feet. She instinctively gripped the back of David's chair as the deck bucked and juddered alarmingly. The control room was filled with the terrifying sound of hull plates screeching in protest at the increased battering of the elemental forces without.

`Robbie,' Norma shouted above the racket, 'I thought I told you to keep

her steady.'

Ì didnae see it coming,' yelled the helmsman, fighting to regain

control.

`The thruster's force shields just went offline,' called David, and Norma

turned back to the image screen just in time to see the precious rocket

disintegrate in a spectacular ball of fire.

Evelyn Smythe grimaced as she swallowed two paracetamol tablets,

gulping back more water than was strictly necessary to ease their passage

and causing an uncomfortable bout of hiccups. In spite of the fact that

medication was becoming more a way of life the older she got, Evelyn

abhorred the constant reminders of her body's frailties and of her own

mortality. This time, however, she had been forced to concede defeat by

"the increasing ferocity of the headache she had suffered *ever* since leaving the Clutch.

The Doctor had put her condition down to her recent experience of the

,Galyari's less-than-hospitable attitudes but Evelyn was certain that she would

have taken even that in her stride if only she were twenty years

younger. Nevertheless, she counted her blessings as she watched the

Doctor fussing around the central control console in a blur of

multi-

Coloured movement that made her head spin.

'Not too far now, old girl.'

'I'll thank you to be a bit more diplomatic about my age, Doctor,'

Mocked Evelyn gently.

expression

'I was addressing the TARDIS,' the Doctor assured her, feigning a hurt

.

Despite her discomfort, Evelyn couldn't help but smile and basked in

the warm glow of the Time Lord's beaming response. Bless him; after the

experiences they'd had aboard the Clutch, that marvellous but doomy

flotilla of starships, slowly edging its way across space, the Doctor had set course for Earth in r927 in the hope of cheering Evelyn up by arranging a meeting with a mutual hero, the pioneer of aviation Charles Lindburgh.

'Are we there yet?' she asked playfully. Time might, as the Doctor was

always pointing out, be relative but aboard the TARDIS it was also

relatively unpredictable. A short trip might take weeks whilst a journey of a thousand years would seem to be over almost before it began.

'Very nearly,' the Doctor told her. 'If we're talking spatially. If, on the Other hand, we're talking temporally, we're only about halfway.'

'Thank you for that,' complained Evelyn. 'That did wonders for my

'headache.'

The Doctor immediately bounded over to the Louis XV chair in which

she was reclining, a look of genuine concern on his face. 'My dear Evelyn, I'm so sorry. Is it not getting any better?'

'Oh, I think so,' she lied, wearily levering herself upright.

'I must say, I've been developing a slight twinge myself,' said the

Doctor, rubbing his brow with one hand, the other taking Evelyn's elbow

and helping her stand. Thinking this was just his way of sympathising

with her, Evelyn was shocked when his face abruptly creased in a rictus of

'agony. He let her go and she toppled back into her chair, her own pain

Increasing to an unprecedented level.

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`TARDIS telepathic circuits,' the Doctor managed to force out through

gritted teeth. 'Swamped by some overwhelmingly powerful mental

energy. We're being affected by the psychic fallout.'

Whatever pain she was experiencing, Evelyn knew it must be infinitely

magnified for the Doctor given his special link with his ship. She looked

on helplessly as he staggered back to the console and placed his hands

firmly on its controls. He kept up his running commentary as if the mere

act of talking could keep the pain at bay.

`We're in the gravest danger,' he gasped. Tor one thing, the psychic shock is quite capable of killing us. Then there's the disturbance to the telepathic circuits themselves. They perform a vital function in the navigation process, empathising with each destination and making sure of a safe materialisation. Too much disruption could lead to a catastrophic spatio-temporal collision. It would spell the end for the old girl. And us!'

Perhaps, thought Evelyn as she watched the Doctor wrestle with the controls, his eyes screwed tightly shut, it was his telepathic rapport with his machine that always landed them in trouble. Maybe his quest for excitement and his unquenchable thirst for knowledge affected the TARDIS' navigation to such a degree that it followed his whims and caprices rather than its own, eminently safer course. These diverting musings were swept away by a new and wholly more excruciating wave of agony.

Norma stared open-mouthed at the screen, the after-image of the explosion still dancing across her retinas. The buffeting that had affected the ship was, thankfully, subsiding. The obliteration of the cargo thruster was an unwelcome reminder of how vulnerable Norma and her crew were to the destructive energies they tried to put out of their thoughts in order to do their jobs.

`Damn!'

Ì'm sorry, Captain.'

Norma glared at David Nkoto. 'Sorry?' she hissed, eyes flashing

dangerously. 'Do you have any idea what that cargo was worth?'

Ìt affects my bonus. Of course I know.'

`Never mind your bonus,' raged Norma, 'that explosion just increased

my sentence. Now the cargo's gone it won't help to pay off my debt and

I'll probably have to pay for the thruster out of my own pocket. It leaves

me further in hock to the Corporation than when we started this trip. So

don't talk to me about bonuses!'

Seeing the hurt in David's eyes, Norma instantly regretted her outburst.

After all, her first officer could hardly be held responsible for her

misfortunes, could he?

'I dinna ken how they can hold ye responsible, Skipper,' opined Robbie.

'Wye ask me, they've only themselves to blame.'

`Nobody did ask you, MacKenzie,' warned David but Norma knew the

Scotsman wouldn't be silenced. It was an old and well-worn argument.

Ìt's another example of 'em cutting costs to maximise profit,' Robbie

grumbled bitterly. 'Our lives depend on this hunk of junk and the

rporation refuses to invest in reliable technology.'

David Nkoto leapt to his feet, fists balling, nostrils flaring in anger. 'The rporation pays you well for your services, MacKenzie,' he growled. 'If

you don't like your terms of employment you can go elsewhere but you

will not spread dissent on this ship. Is that clear?'

`Say what ye like, Mr Nkoto,' pressed Robbie, 'but the sensors didnae

detect that last wee bump and I only just managed to bring her back under

ntrol. Tell the widows back on Europa how wonderful your Corporation

is.'

Norma stepped between David and Robbie as her first officer threw

himself at the helmsman who was already launching from his seat.

`That's enough!' she barked. 'David, as First Officer you should know

better. And, Robbie, you will recall that I am one of those Europan

widows. I know the Corporation's shortcomings as well as anyone and

I promise you that I will make sure you're all kept safe.'

She was relieved to feel both men relax, at least recognising that each

Was equally at fault. She knew that David Nkoto felt indebted to the Corporation for plucking him from the slums of Ganymede, sponsoring

him through university on Io and fast-tracking his career in the mining division. This being the case, Norma could understand and even admire

his loyalty. On the other hand, she knew from bitter experience that the accusations levelled at the Corporation by Robbie MacKenzie were not

comptetely

unfounded.

'Don't forget,' she reminded them, 'that, one way or another, we're all

In the same boat.'

Norma knew that she commanded one of the finest crews on Jupiter

*id didn't like to see any disharmony amongst what she felt to be her She prided herself that their loyalty was to their captain first and

the Corporation second. She was not disappointed when David and

Robbie returned to their respective workstations without further ado.

Norma straightened her tunic. 'Thank you, gentlemen. Now, if I'm to

report to the dreaded Mr Hepton, I need to know the full story about what happened to that cargo thruster.' As the door leading from the command

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deck slid aside with a grinding of hydraulic gears, she turned back.

`David, you're in charge until I get back. If you need me, I'll be in the

refinery talking to Koop.'

As the bulkhead door ground shut behind her, Norma leaned her back

against it, closing her eyes and breathing deeply. What wouldn't she give

to be processing rubbish in one of the recycling plants on Callisto? No

responsibility. No staff. Bliss.

Forcing herself away from the hard metal of the door and the

comforting dreams of an easier life, Norma set off along the

companionway, stepping automatically over the ducting that traversed the

floor and brushing aside the corrugated tubing that snaked down from

ceiling to deck at regular intervals. In her heart of hearts, Norma knew

that Robbie was right about the equipment they were forced to work with.

Certainly Koopmaan was blameless. The man was, in many respects,

insufferable but his professionalism could never be questioned. However,

she knew what Hepton would...

—*Norma* —

She staggered as the sudden cacophony reverberated around the inside

of her skull.

—Normanormanormanormanormnnormanormanormanonnanormanor —

Her eyes narrowed, her hands coming up in a reflex action to protect

them from a bright light shining from along the passageway. The raucous

scraping noise combined with the voices in her head calling her name

over and over again. Finally, the vague notion of a tall blue box appearing

from nowhere caused sensory overload and she tumbled backwards into

oblivion.

Èvelyn?' The Doctor's voice drifted to her from a very long way away.

Èvelyn, are you all right?'

She opened her eyes cautiously and was pleasantly surprised that the

bright glare of the console room didn't aggravate her headache.

`Perfectly fine, Doctor, thank you.'

`Your headache?'

Ìt's completely gone,' she realised. 'Must have been the paracetamol.'

The Doctor shook his head emphatically. 'The scream stopped. I should

have taken your headache more seriously, Evelyn. Recognised it for

the

warning it evidently was. It seems you're quite sensitive to telepathic

impulses.'

`Did you say "scream"?'

`Well, that's what it felt like,' confirmed the Doctor. 'An immensely

powerful mind screaming out its anguish.'

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Was this strictly necessary?' asked Evelyn, indicating the red tartan

blanket draped over her knees.

Ì thought I'd make you comfortable,' protested the Doctor.

Ì look like my old Aunt Gladys,' she told him, casting the blanket aside

and standing up smartly. 'She's 96 and I'm not in my dotage yet, you **know!'**

Òf course not, Evelyn. I only thought...'

Evelyn giggled. 'Oh, come on, Doctor. I'm teasing.' And as the Doctor

brightened, she observed, 'The old girl survived then?'

`Yes,' he grinned, patting the console appreciatively. 'She effected an

emergency materialisation.'

`Might one ask where?'

`That's the curious thing.' The Doctor frowned at the readings as if

expecting them to change to give a more believable explanation than they

were presently communicating. 'The year is 2553 and we've landed on

‚Jupiter.'

'Why is that any more curious than any number of other strange

landing places we've materialised in in the past?'

`Because Jupiter is a gas giant,' the Doctor informed her solemnly.

'There's nothing safe for us to land on here.'

He operated the scanner, the shutters sliding apart to reveal the

uninspiring view of a dimly lit corridor.

Evelyn pulled her cardigan tighter about her shoulders against the

currents of chill air circulating around the passageway. While the Doctor

locked the TARDIS door, she ran her fingers along the top of one of the **many** pipes fixed to the charcoal-coloured walls. They came away coated **In** a thick layer of oily filth.

Ìt's a bit dingy,' she said as the Doctor sauntered over.

`The dirt and grime of a working spaceship,' the Doctor informed her,

handing her a grubby yellow handkerchief. 'It's not all gleaming white **and** flashing lights, you know. This is the business end of Earth's empire.'

The Doctor touched a control and a heavy shutter inched its way open

revealing one of the most spectacular sights Evelyn had ever seen. She

Joined the Doctor at the view port and gazed in wonder at the storms of Jupiter as they swirled in a maelstrom of orange fury.

`Fascinating,' said the Time Lord. 'It's the first time I've seen Jupiter's

atmosphere from the inside. What an incredible experience.'

always thought Jupiter's gravity would crush anything going too deep

Into its atmosphere,' said Evelyn.

The Doctor pointed out a faint glow that shimmered between the

window and the clouds. 'The ship generates its own magnetic force field

to protect it from the worst of the weather. Then there's the hull. That'll

be a couple of metres ofdurilium. Very strong and thick enough to protect

us from the high energy particle radiation out there.'

'It seems an awful lot of trouble to go to,' said Evelyn. 'Presumably it

isn't just so the likes of us can enjoy the view?'

'Indeed not. As I said, this is the business end of Earth's first space

empire. As it expands it consumes more and more resources. That

situation is exacerbated at the moment because the empire is at war with

the Daleks. So the solar system is being mined for the minerals and gases

it relies upon for its very survival. I think this must be some kind of gas

refinery ship.'

Whilst he was speaking, eyes still shining as they surveyed the view

through the window, Evelyn sensed movement in an alcove a little

distance away. As she wandered towards it, she became aware of a female

voice murmuring to itself, the actual words unintelligible. She peered into

the gloomy space and, as her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, she could

just make out the body of a woman curled up into an almost fetal ball.

She called to the Doctor for help and within seconds he was at her side

and helping the woman to sit up. As they carefully unfolded her from the

alcove, Evelyn judged the woman to be in her mid-forties with an elfin face framed by blonde hair cut short and spiky. Her eyelids fluttered open to reveal large bright blue eyes. She was dressed in a baggy grey uniform which did nothing to flatter her slim figure. An ID badge pinned to the woman's tunic displayed her photograph and identified her as Captain Norma Kelligan. As they sat her gently against the bulkhead, Captain Kelligan's head whipped from side to side and her voice grew louder and more insistent.

— You must *be more gentle* -

- Oust don't know my own strength -

- You'll *learn* -

- *I need* you with *me, Norma* -

- I'm here -

- I sometimes think I'm the only *sane one here* -

- That'd *be* a first -

-

can't stay -

- Thom? -

- They're too powerful -

- Thom! -

- I'm being *consumed* —

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— Thom, don't *go* —

Norma! —

—

'Thom!' Norma threw her arms around her husband's neck, holding on tight and burying her head in his chest. She had already lost him once and was determined that neither of them should have to endure that pain again.

There came a gentle but embarrassed throat clearing from the person in her embrace and she felt strong hands disentangling her.

`Thom?' She looked up into the discomfited face of a total stranger and recoiled from his tight smile.

Ì'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone else, young lady,' he said. Ì've been called quite a few things in my time but I've certainly never been known as Thom.'

Norma struggled to her feet, smoothing down her crumpled uniform and running her hands through her hair, attempting to regain her composure. She looked the big blond-haired man in the weird multi-coloured clothing up and down and then turned to scrutinise his companion, a middle-aged woman in a woolly cardigan and tweed skirt of **a** design Norma remembered from history lessons. The woman had an amused expression on her face that did nothing to improve Norma's mood.

`Who the hell are you?' she spluttered indignantly.

Ì' m Evelyn Smythe,' the woman introduced herself. 'And this is the

Doctor.'

`The blue box,' remembered Norma, marching over to the artefact,

reaching out to convince herself that it was real and snatching her hand

away as a tingling sensation prickled her fingers. She spun round to face

the newcomers. 'Doctor you say? Are you a Corporation scientist?'

The Doctor looked blank. 'Corporation?'

`You are on a Lorannan-Ycole Corporation gas dredger. If you don't

work for the Corporation, you could be in serious trouble.'

Òh, yes, the Corporation,' enthused the Doctor in a manner that didn't

entirely convince. 'Myself and Doctor Smythe here have been working on

the matter transmission programme '

`What matter transmission programme?'

`You haven't heard about the matter transmission programme ? ' asked

the Doctor. 'I can't say I'm surprised. Terribly hush-hush at the moment.

That's how we got here.' He indicated the blue box. 'Prototype,' he

finished with another earnest smile.

Norma thought that she'd never heard such rubbish in her life but

before she could say anything to challenge the Doctor's story, the woman

who had called herself Evelyn interrupted her train of thought.

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Ì say, I don't want to worry anyone or anything but, given the weather outside, should this dredger thingy be vibrating quite as much as it is?'

Norma realised that with her attention on what had been happening to her and then upon these visitors from nowhere, she had totally failed to notice the shock waves shaking the very fabric of the dredger or the sounds of rattling and stressed metal. Without another word she elbowed her way past the two strangers and set off back to the command deck.

David Nkoto stood behind the helmsman's post watching as Robbie MacKenzie struggled once more with the guidance controls.

`This isnae just localised turbulence,' MacKenzie gasped, the strain telling in his voice.

In no mood for a further clash, David returned to his command seat, checking a read-out on his own console. 'It must be,' he asserted. 'We're not picking up any signals from the warning buoys.'

`Did ye do a sensor sweep?'

David aimed a withering glance at the back of the Scotsman's head. Did he think he was wet behind the ears? He swiftly input the necessary commands and watched the computer screen as the scan results appeared.

`Nothing,' he confirmed. 'Wait a minute. There seems to be another

ship just a few kilometres ahead, on the same course as us.'

David looked round as the door cranked open and Norma clattered

through.

`What's going on?' she demanded.

`Turbulence,' David reported, ignoring the audible sneer from the

direction of the helm. 'Who are they?' he asked as two strangers traipsed

onto the command deck in his captain's wake.

`Corporation scientists,' beamed the man.

Norma was studying David's scan results. 'Can we get a visual image of

these readings on the main screen?'

David entered the requisite instructions and an image resolved itself on

the main screen at the front of the command deck. David followed

Norma's gaze as she stared incredulously at the ghostly outline ofanother

dredger shimmering in and out amongst the roiling clouds.

Ì know that ship,' whispered Norma, and David winced inwardly. He

knew what was coming and wasn't to be disappointed. 'It's Thom.'

Carefully but firmly, David took Norma by the arm and guided her to

one side of the command deck, deliberately placing himself between his

captain and the main screen.

`Captain,' he began gently. 'Norma, we've been through this before.

You have to be more careful. There's already rumours flying about the

crew that we're being haunted by a ghost ship. Don't add fuel to the fire.'

He caught sight of the tall male stranger sidling up close to them, an

idiotic look on his face. 'What do you want?'

`Nothing,' said the man. 'Except that your "turbulence" is getting worse. I've been having a look at your readings and, if I were you, I'd move the ship closer to the warning buoys positioned on the other side.'

`But they *are* transmitting warning signals,' protested David. Was the man suicidal?

`Yes,' confirmed the stranger. But they'll keep you away from a danger

that you know is there rather than letting you fly straight into a disaster

you're not being warned about.'

David couldn't help but smile. 'I guess you have a point, friend,' he

conceded. 'MacKenzie, bring us closer to the warning buoys off the port

bow.'

Robbie made the necessary corrections to the dredger's course and

within minutes the vibrations all through the ship had decreased to

normal levels. Along with everyone else present, David released a deep

sigh of relief.

`Who's Thom?' he heard the woman asking Norma and his heart sank

at the Captain's reply.

`Thom was my husband. He was killed a couple of years ago when the

dredger he was commanding was lost. And he was talking to me out in

the corridor just now.'

!I cannot believe der Captain hasn't been down here already,' said

Hendryk Koopmaan taking a drag on a stubby cigar. 'Not like her to miss

der opportunity to have a go at der working man, eh, Leo? I mean, she must be looking for someone to blame for der thruster.'

Leonello Felice looked up from the piece of complex machinery he was

working on and smiled a toothy smile, eyes crinkling at the corners. As he **looked** down at his assistant's sweat-streaked face, Hendryk counted his **blessings as he** did every day of his working life. It wasn't often a technical **officer** came across a subordinate who was happy to take on more than

his fair share of duties.

Leonello thrived on the hard graft involved in running the refinery,

leaving Hendryk to deal with the admin and the important decisions like **Whether** to brew tea or coffee. **At** present, up to his muscular arms in **number** three impeller, Leo was in his element.

`**Tell** you what,' said Hendryk, his pointed features settling into

'**sardonic** smirk. 'I'm gonna go see her.' He slicked down his lifeless hair 111

and deposited the resultant grease from his hands onto his mucky

overalls.

`Why you wanna look for trouble, bossy' grinned Leonello. 'Leave well

alone, I say.'

`Because,' considered Hendryk, 'it's time she knew what we're worth.

Time we was paid danger money. Things exploding all over der place and

we're at der front line, eh? You carry on with what you're doing, I'll be

back!'

`Hokey-dokey, boss.'

Hendryk swung his supple body easily through the framework of pipes

and cables that connected the giant tanks of the refinery. He was used to

getting around in here and moved towards the exit like a monkey leaping

from tree to tree in the jungle.

The more he thought about it, the more he convinced himself that he

was right to press his claim for an increased bonus. The Captain would

have to *see* it his way or, without him and Leonello in the refinery, there wouldn't be any bonuses.

He stepped into the cramped service duct that led eventually to the main

corridor running along the spine of the dredger. Bent almost double,

Hendryk loped through the gloom dreaming of money and the girls and

booze he would spend it on back on Europa.

The lighting in the service duct suddenly plunged to a new low causing

Hendryk to pause in mid-step. The dull glow from the lamps positioned

at regular intervals along the bulkheads brightened for a moment before

flickering and going out altogether. Fighting to control the panic rising in him, Hendryk turned to look in the direction of a quiet shuffling sound

that he only heard because it was so alien to the usual cacophony on

board.

`Leo,' he called, screwing his eyes up in an attempt to penetrate the

darkness. `Leonello, is that you?'

No answer.

His nerve finally broke when a glowing cloud of matter seeped into the

service duct and began to coalesce into the figure of a man. Hendryk

turned and fled in the direction of the main corridor but the spectre was

quicker and he felt a cold sensation spread through him as the apparition

caught up with him and reached in to touch his soul. He tried to cry out

but the scream dried in his throat.

And all *he could see was the riches offered to him as a reward. Piles of gold and jewels;* riches *beyond* the dreams of *avarice.*

And *there was* Dan Preston, *beckoning him on, encouraging* him to *share in* the *riches they had all dreamed of finding when* they *came out here in the* first place.

They'd talked about *the* riches they'd earn working the *dredgers;* enough for *everyone.*

They'd toasted their *good* fortune in the Nice as Ice Bar on Europa. To be taken on **by** the Corporation was a ***dream come true.***

The ghostly figure of his old friend floated through the bulkhead and

out of view. He could see them all, in his mind's eye, sitting around in the luxury afforded by their success, drinking beer and playing cards. There

was a place for him there too, beside the glittering pile of riches that was I just out of his reach.

His hands, as if acting independently of his brain, worked their way

through the three-stage unlocking of the airlock.

Norma felt the icy fear pricking her skin at the sound every space worker

dreaded to hear. The depressurisation alert was a shrill wail that cut

across all the other sounds on the dredger. She was at the telemeter

station in a second, David, Evelyn and the Doctor crowding around as her

bands blurred over the instrument panel.

'Section 37,' she read.

'That's down near the refinery,' David told her.

The external hatch is open,' said Norma in disbelief.

She operated more controls and a view of the service duct appeared on

the image screen. The airlock could clearly be seen gaping open onto red **and** orange clouds Small, unsecured items were bouncing along the

narrow corridor and being sucked out of the ship by the force of sudden

depressurisation.

'That can't happen,' insisted David in direct contradiction of the

evidence of his own eyes. 'There are failsafes that can only be overridden

manually from the inside.'

'Is there an external camera?' asked the Doctor.

Norma located the correct switch and the image on the screen changed.

The exterior of the dredger was scarred and pitted by the constant barrage

of atmospheric detritus that was hurled against its hull despite the force

, field that enveloped it.

'Koop,' breathed Norma.

The Dutchman was emerging from the outer hatch onto the dredger's

bull, clawing his way along the metal plates as they watched in horror.

Norma knew that without the protection of a spacesuit Hendryk was

dead.

redden

Already, the heat and radiation were causing his exposed skin to

and blister. Gasping for breath, his legs buckled under him and Poop was finally swept away by the high-speed winds, his body pitching

over and over and disappearing into the clouds.

The shock felt by those who had witnessed the tragedy was almost

physically tangible. Evelyn turned her face away and the Doctor placed

a comforting arm around her shoulders.

`Why would he go outside like that?' she asked, uncomprehending and

close to tears.

Norma had no answer for her.

`David, have the compartment shield doors activated?' she asked dully.

David checked another panel and nodded. 'Section 37 has been

isolated. Pressure and life support in the rest of the ship has been

preserved. Leonello will be trapped in the refinery.'

`Get Ajay and Tracie onto it,' ordered Norma.

I.

Èr, Captain.' Norma followed David's pointing finger, her eyes

alighting on the telepathic communications booth and the flashing panel

above its door. 'Looks like Europa want a word.'

`Hepton,' sighed Norma.

She walked grudgingly over to the booth, pulled open the door and lay

on the contoured padded couch within. Once the door had resealed itself,

the booth was completely soundproof but, to be entirely certain that there

could be no distractions, a shield hinged itself over Norma's eyes and ears.

`Captain Kelligan.' The nasal whine grated on Norma's brain like a rat

scratching at the door. It never ceased to amaze her that telepathic voices

were, without exception, exactly the same as those produced by their

owners' larynxes.

`This is Kelligan,' she sent mentally.

Àh, there you are, Captain,' oozed Hepton condescendingly. 'I trust your tour of duty is going well?'

Norma tensed, trying to calm herself before signalling involuntarily

what had just happened to Hendryk Koopmaan. She wasn't sure why she

wanted to keep it from the Director of Operations Jupiter) except that he

would somehow make her feel that she was to blame. That and the fact

that she knew Hepton didn't care one way or the other about the dredger

crews as long as Corporation profit margins weren't affected, decided her

to confine the details of the accident to her official log.

Ì sense that it is not but, even without sense, I could hardly fail to notice two million credits' worth of thruster going boom-boom along with its

valuable cargo.'

Ì am investigating the incident and will, of course, file a full report with ii

the Corporation.'

Ì know you will, Captain. And as I am the Corporation on Jupiter, I look

forward to that report with the greatest anticipation. Before you begin

your paperwork, however, allow me to inform you that our sensors have

detected a rich stream of methane in your vicinity. If you act swiftly and

perform, for once, at optimum efficiency, you may even make up for the

loss of my cargo thruster.'

Not trusting herself to think anything, Norma felt the target

coordinates download themselves into her memory.

`Thank you, Mr Hepton.' Had it been necessary to actually speak the

words, she would have choked on them.

`What was all that about?' asked Evelyn as Norma stepped from the

communications booth, ashen faced.

`Some sort of telepathic conference, I think,' replied the Doctor. 'Shall

we find out?'

They moved closer to the Captain as she scribbled some figures on

a data pad before handing it to MacKenzie. The helmsman glanced at the numbers and looked up worriedly.

Àre ye sure of these, Skipper?' he asked. Ìf I set this course, we'll be

sailing very close to the wind.'

`MacKenzie, I think the Captain knows what she's doing,' rebuked

Nkoto.

MacKenzie shrugged and began laying in the requested course.

`Might I make an observation?' Without waiting for a reply, the Doctor

carried on. 'Those coordinates will take us extremely close to the vortex

between two bands of wind blowing in opposite directions. The wind

speeds in there top boo kilometres per hour. More than enough to tear

this ship apart.'

Evelyn got the impression that he was saying this as much to show off

his knowledge as to inform the crew of facts they were presumably already

well acquainted with.

`There's no danger,' Nkoto assured them. 'We can rely on the

navigation buoys to warn us of any trouble.'

`Suppose you don't see the buoys?' asked Evelyn. 'Or your computers

don't get their signals what with all the atmospheric interference there

must be?'

Ì would sense them,' asserted Norma. 'I receive the signals

telepathically regardless of any meteorological conditions.'

Ànd where's the closest buoy now?' demanded the Doctor, as if testing

her claim.

Norma concentrated for a moment, her brow furrowing. 'It's quite

faint,' she said, pressing her fingertips to her temples. 'I think it's inside

the wind vortex.'

`Why would that be?' questioned Nkoto. 'It should be warning us off

from there.'

`The only reason I can think of,' the Doctor told him, 'would be to lure

a dredger in there.'

Evelyn was glad that the incredulous stares cast in his direction

indicated that she wasn't the only one mystified as to the motive behind

such an act.

`There must be rich pickings for a dredger like this within the wind

vortex,' elucidated the Doctor, 'what with everything stirred up. And,

should a ship be lost, the cause could always be blamed on a faulty buoy.'

David Nkoto shook his head. The Corporation would never go that far.'

A cry from Robbie MacKenzie made them all turn and look at the main

image screen. Looming out of the clouds was a cylindrical shape

constructed of what looked to Evelyn like heavy-duty armour plating. The

spheres at each end of the cylinder were encircled by what obviously

should have been flashing lights like those on the outside of aircraft.

These were ominously dark.

À navigation buoy,' warned MacKenzie.

`Curiously inactive,' observed the Doctor.

Ìt's coming straight for us,' pointed out Evelyn. 'Oh, was that the

obvious just being stated?'

She realised that Norma was standing stock-still, unable to respond to

this latest crisis. The Doctor moved to a control console and was soon

merrily tapping away, much to David Nkoto's chagrin.

`What the hell do you think you're doing?' demanded the first officer.

`Saving your ship,' replied the Doctor, not looking up. 'By remodulating

your protective shield and then oscillating its magnetic field, I can capture the buoy rather than letting it plough straight into us.' He looked up

smugly as a slight jolt passed through the command deck. `D'you think

we could bring it aboard? I'd rather like to take a closer look at it.'

`See to it, Mr Nkoto,' ordered Norma. 'I'll be in my cabin.'

Evelyn had followed Norma to her cabin and now stood outside the door

wondering why she was here. The Doctor had encouraged her with one of

his subtle nods and winks but Evelyn realised now that she had already

made up her mind. Perhaps she was drawn to the sadness she perceived

hidden just below the dredger captain's stoic surface. Sudden resolve

overcoming her reticence, Evelyn knocked on the door, opening it and

stepping through before being invited or, indeed, before the occupant

had

a chance to turn her away.

The cabin was a tiny utilitarian space with just enough room for the

single bunk, a hygiene cubicle in the corner and a desk and chair. Norma

was sitting there, her back to the door, staring at a hand-held image

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screen. As Evelyn moved closer she could see, over Norma's shoulder,

that the screen showed the eerie shape of the ghost ship.

`Captain Kelligan?' she ventured. 'Norma?'

Norma visibly started as though she had been so absorbed as to be

oblivious to her visitor's presence until she spoke. Then she looked up at Evelyn

with red-rimmed eyes and wiped the tears staining her cheeks with

the back of her hand.

'I know it's impossible,' she smiled sadly. 'It can't be a ghost ship.

I don't believe in ghosts.'

`Quite right too,' encouraged Evelyn, sitting on the edge of the bed.

'One thing travelling with the Doctor has taught me is that there's always a rational scientific explanation for everything. Even if the science is a million years beyond yours truly.'

'It looks just like Thom's ship,' sniffed Norma. 'But it's probably some

sort of sensor echo, a reflection of this dredger caused by the

atmospherics.'

`What happened to Thom?'

'He died,' stated Norma simply. 'Something went wrong and his ship

strayed into the Great Red Spot, the largest, most violent storm in the

Solar System. The force field couldn't protect them and the dredger was

just ripped apart.'

'A dreadful accident.'

`Not according to the Corporation,' said Norma bitterly. 'Everyone

knew Thom was fond of a drink. Lorannan-Ycole said he was drunk on

duty and therefore culpable for the loss of the ship.'

Evelyn was confused. 'I don't see how they could know that I mean,

presumably there can't have been survivors to act as witnesses?'

Àll dredger captains are telepathic,' explained Norma. 'They have to be

to enable them to maintain contact with Europa base. Standard

'communication systems just can't penetrate the Jovian atmosphere from

the depths we operate at.'

remembering 'And you use telepathy to help navigate the ship,' realised Evelyn recent events with navigation buoys.

'In particularly dangerous conditions, yes. Thom's ship ignored

a warning buoy and ploughed on into the storm.'

'But you almost did something similar,' pointed out Evelyn. 'Perhaps

the warning system was at fault.'

'Don't think I haven't considered that,' said Norma. 'But Thom also

sent a telepathic distress call. His final thoughts were recorded by Europa.

He said, "I can't control it. It's controlling me now. I need help." The words are burned into my brain. So, you see, Thom condemned himself.'

Evelyn was silent for a few moments, moved by Norma's tragic story.

`Why do you carry on working in such dangerous conditions?' she ventured at length. 'Especially after what happened to your husband?'

Ì don't have a choice.' She looked at Evelyn levelly. 'When Thom was found guilty, compensation was awarded to the Corporation and the families of the dead crewmen. As Thom's next of kin, that makes me responsible. Until the debt is paid in full, I belong to the Corporation body and soul.'

Evelyn was shocked. 'How long will it take to pay?'

Norma rubbed her forehead, pain gathering behind her eyes. 'Longer than I'll live, I should think.'

Suddenly, the Captain went rigid in her seat before slumping to the floor, banging her head on the edge of the desk as she went. She lay there,

wide eyes unseeing and lips moving soundlessly.

`Norma!' cried Evelyn, dropping to her knees and cradling the Captain's

head in her lap. The attack passed as swiftly as it had come and Norma

smiled up at her weakly.

`Sorry about that,' she apologised. 'It's been happening rather a lot

recently, to one degree or another.'

`What's wrong with you?'

`You know I told you that dredger captains are telepathic?' Evelyn

nodded and Norma continued. 'To avoid distraction, the captain is the

only telepath on board. The rest of the crew are screened specifically to

make sure they possess no telepathic ability whatsoever.'

`That makes sense, I suppose,' admitted Evelyn. 'So?'

Evelyn helped Norma to her feet. 'I keep being attacked by another

telepathic presence on board. I must get back to work.'

As Norma left the cabin, Evelyn was left to ponder the possibility that

a telepathic enemy lurking somewhere on the ship was inducing the

apparitions experienced by the dredger's personnel. A shiver ran up her

spine and she buttoned her cardigan.

Ajay Thakrar was a giant bear of a man with a cheerful disposition and

a friendly smiling face dominated by a thick black bushy beard. His

muscular arms bulged inside his spacesuit as he and his assistant, Tracie

Wilson, manoeuvred the navigation buoy into one of the dredger's larger

loading bays. Even with the aid of the buoy's own anti-gray generator and

the hydraulic strength of the suits, it had still been hard going and Ajay

blinked the sweat out of his eyes and shook his head to shift the foggy

ache that had settled within.

Àjay

, you all right, mate?' Tracie's dulcet tones shrilled in his ear.

Ì'm fine,' he growled into his own suit's communicator. 'Too much

beer as usual.'

Ònly you froze for a bit back there,' persisted his assistant.

`Temperatures on Jupiter tend to do that to a guy,' he quipped. 'I'll soon

warm up. Really, I'm fine.'

`Looks like the cause of your discomfort is keen to get on.' Tracie

nodded towards the airlock, no easy feat in a space helmet.

The tall, curly haired stranger in the anachronistic clothes could be

clearly seen through the thick plexi-glass viewing panel built into the

doors. He was practically bouncing up and down with impatience.

Òkay, Tracie,' said Ajay. 'Let's get it over with as quick as we can. Close

the outer doors and repressurise. Let's give the man what he wants.'

It took just under three minutes for full life-support conditions to be

restored to the loading bay. Ajay popped the seals on his helmet and

removed it, watching appreciatively as Tracie did likewise, her long

chestnut curls cascading from confinement. Catching his look, she stuck

out her tongue at him and he was forced to laugh. She was just one of the

lads at heart. Smiling, she marched over to the inner airlock and bashed

the release panel with her gauntleted hand. The doors cranked open and

the stranger stomped into the bay.

`Well, it's about time,' he moaned as, without so much as a glance at

Ajay and Tracie, he made straight for the buoy, its anti-grays adjusting to

on-board gravity. Hands thrust deep in his pockets, he wandered around

the buoy bending and crouching and stretching up on tiptoe to examine

every inch of its surface. And all the time he was `hmm'-ing and àh'-ing

to himself.

For Ajay, the last straw came when the stranger shrugged off his coat,

threw it over a convenient computer terminal, rolled up his shirtsleeves

and began rooting through Ajay's toolbox. This interloper might have

charmed the Captain into ordering her crew to offer him every assistance

but no engineer worth his salt was about to let anyone mess with the tools

of his trade. He stepped forward heavily, folded his arms across his barrel-chest and cleared his throat meaningfully.

To his credit, the man looked up from his defiling and smiled the most

contrite smile Ajay had ever seen. He wasn't too certain of its authenticity, however. The man, still blasting out waves of

camaraderie, straightened

up.

`My dear fellow, I apologise most abjectly. I am the Doctor and I really

should try to behave more like the guest I am. I wonder if I could assist you **in** examining this apparatus?'

Soon, Ajay and Tracie were happily tinkering away with the innards of

the buoy, having removed several inspection panels chosen, apparently at

random, by the Doctor. As they worked the Doctor guided them to

perform whatever task he required so that, though they were doing the

actual hands-on dissection, the Doctor was carrying out the autopsy.

`There can't be any problem with the navigation net,' complained

Tracie.

Òh?' retorted the Doctor. 'Why not? I grant you it's not a comfortable

thought, but it's far from impossible, surely?'

Èntire network was replaced a couple of years ago,' Ajay told him.

`There were some accidents. Dredgers were lost. Corporation thought it

best to replace the lot. The system's top of the range.'

`Mnim.' The Doctor was thoughtful. Then his head darted forward to

get a closer look at something revealed by Tracie's probing. 'What's that?'

Tracie delicately teased the object of the Doctor's curiosity from the

tangled technological nest of wires and filaments. Taking a pair of

wire

cutters, the Doctor snipped the circuit free and screwed a watchmaker's

eyeglass into position, scrutinising his prize minutely.

Curiosity overcame Ajay. 'What is it?'

Ùnless I'm very much mistaken, this is a primitive telekinetic circuit.'

Ajay looked closely at the tiny square in the Doctor's hand. It was the

most advanced piece of electronic engineering he'd ever laid eyes on and

this man was calling it primitive.

`This buoy has been fitted with a means of switching it on and off

telepathically,' announced the Doctor gravely. 'Someone is using the

Jovian navigation net to manipulate the dredger crews.'

`What's going on, Evelyn?'

Evelyn had never been more pleased to see the Doctor than when he

came storming onto the command deck. She indicated the main image

screen where the ghostly dredger could be seen just a few kilometres

ahead of their own vessel. Norma was standing at the centre of the room,

eyes fixed on the screen.

`She's been like that since we got back here,' Evelyn told him. 'Doctor,

she believes that's her dead husband's lost ship.'

`That,' said the Doctor emphatically, 'is impossible. Mr Nkoto, you have

to alter course. Take the dredger away from that apparition.'

Evelyn held her breath while David glanced uncertainly at his captain,

obviously hoping for a sign, no matter how small, that she was still in

command. Even Evelyn could see that there would be none, Norma stood

there, a shell of the woman she had come to know.

`Mr Nkoto,' urged the Doctor.

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`MacKenzie,' ordered David. 'New course heading. Turn this ship about

and begin ascent to departure orbit.'

Àye-aye, sir,' said MacKenzie with heartfelt relief.

Norma was no more than a blur as she screamed across the command

deck, knocking MacKenzie sideways. She tore at the helm with both

hands, shattering the panels and clawing dementedly at the wiring within.

`For goodness' sake, get her away from there,' yelled the Doctor.

It took both David and MacKenzie to drag the captain away from her

task of mindless sabotage. Evelyn was amazed that she hadn't been killed

outright by the power that arced between the severed cables and electronic

components of the wrecked instrumentation. She stepped forward and

held Norma tightly, feeling the sobs wracking the captain's body, a

symptom of her tortured soul.

`Well,' sighed MacKenzie, `no way are we changing course now. Helm's

totally kaput.'

`That,' said the Doctor, 'is rather a shame. Look at the screen.'

`My God,' breathed David Nkoto.

The main image screen showed the ghost ship dwarfed by a sheer wall of swirling red and orange clouds illuminated from within by giant jagged fingers of pure white lightning.

`The Great Red Spot.' Even the Doctor seemed awestruck.

`The largest, most violent storm in the Solar System,' Evelyn remembered Norma's description. 'Well, my experience of thunderstorms is that they don't last very long.'

Èven in your time the storm had lasted over 300 years,' the Doctor told her. 'And it's over twice the size of Earth.'

Òur records tell us it's grown in size and intensity over the last 500 years,' David informed them, his neutral tone unnaturally calm.

`No warning!' exclaimed Norma suddenly.

David checked the readings on the nearest functioning navigation console. 'She's right. There should be over a hundred danger buoys on this side of the storm alone. Every one of them ought to be transmitting warning signals. Not one of them is functioning.'

`They've been switched off,' the Doctor told them.

`Does it matter?' asked MacKenzie. 'Even if we got a warning, we couldnae alter course. Can things get any worse?'

`Things just got worse,' said David with no trace of humour. 'The force **field** generators just went offline. They're shutting down.'

Òh, my God,' stammered Robbie MacKenzie. 'We're all dead.'

`Just like that?' asked Evelyn. Would it just be a big bang and then

nothing?

`No,' said the Doctor. 'Not just like that. If it was, we wouldn't still be

here.'

`The Doctor's right,' said Norma sitting upright from where Evelyn and

the others had lain her down. 'There's a failsafe. The generators may have

been switched off but they're programmed to run down slowly. We have

a little time.'

`We need to evacuate the ship,' the Doctor suggested urgently.

Ìn the TARDIS?' asked Evelyn.

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not with the telepathic circuits in the state

they're in.'

`Then how?' Evelyn couldn't imagine any means of escape from the

hostile environment in which they seemed to be trapped.

`By using one of the cargo thrusters,' announced the Doctor.

`Ye have got to be joking!' spluttered Robbie MacKenzie.

Nobody else said a word.

Evelyn watched in fascination as Ajay Thakrar and Tracie Wilson, working

in perfect harmony, probed the circuits locking the door to the refinery. It was clear from the way they cooperated that they had been a team for

a long time. Neither needed words and Tracie seemed to know which

particular tool Ajay was going to require next almost before he himself did.

The journey to the refinery had been a fraught race against time. Section 37 was still depressurised and the two engineers had had to suit up and move through the service duct closing bulkhead doors as they went to maintain life support in the rest of the dredger. Eventually, they had reached the stricken area and sealed the external hatch so that the rest of the crew could pass through in safety. The entire journey had taken 22-and-a-half minutes but the threat of imminent death had stretched each second to infinity.

Ajay stood back with a flourish as the door to the refinery clanked open to reveal Leonello Felice standing there expectantly. 'What's going on,' he demanded. 'Where's Koop?'

`Koop's dead,' said David Nkoto curtly, clambering through into the refinery. 'Have you got a thruster primed and ready?'

`Yeah.' Leonello was taken aback. 'Why?'

`Because you're going to need it to get away from this ship before it blows up,' Evelyn told him.

`This way,' said Leonello as soon as David had confirmed Evelyn's story with a nod. He led the way through the tangled pipes and tubes.

Evelyn almost laughed out loud when she saw the small hatch that led

into one of the tanks on the side of the cargo thruster. It was one of those round ones with a domed top, hinged at one side and with a huge locking

wheel in the centre. It just seemed so low-tech, if that was the right term.

David started the automatic launch sequence, punching his security

clearance code into the refinery's remote command console. Evelyn

watched as the crew clambered one by one through the hatch and into the

cargo thruster.

Èverything's ready,' said David. 'Automatic launch in just under three

minutes. Come on, MacKenzie, let's get aboard.'

Ì have real reservations about trusting my life to a Corporation cargo

thruster,' complained the helmsman. 'Look what happened to the last

one!'

`Fine,' said David. 'Stay here and get smeared across Jupiter when the

shields go down and the storm hits!'

Robbie MacKenzie, his face drained of all colour, was disappearing

ough the hatch before David had finished speaking.

`Hey, where's Ajay?' asked David, looking around the refinery. 'He's not

sot aboard the thruster.'

Ì haven't seen him since he opened the door,' realised Evelyn. 'You'd

best get aboard before that rocket leaves without you.'

`What about you, Evelyn?' David asked, genuinely concerned.

Ì'll find Ajay and meet up with the Doctor and Norma,' she told him

firmly. 'If the Doctor can't save the ship, I'm sure we'll find some other way.'

Òkay,' said David eventually. 'Good luck, Evelyn.' He ducked through

the hatch, swinging the cover into position as he went.

Ànd to you,' said Evelyn. Was it her imagination or was the dredger

rattling and shaking more than it had been just minutes before? Best find the Doctor, she told herself.

As she emerged from the refinery and began to make her way back

Along the service duct to the main corridor, Evelyn was shocked to see Ajay step from the shadows and bar her way.

`Dear God, Ajay,' she gasped, her heart skipping a beat frighteningly,

'you nearly gave me a heart attack.' Literally, she thought ruefully.

The engineer just stood there, face devoid of any emotion and regarded

her with cold, lifeless eyes.

Àjay?' Evelyn looked closer. 'Whatever's the matter with you?'

When Ajay spoke, it was not with his own voice but with that of

a stranger who just happened to be using his vocal cords. 'Doctor Evelyn

Smythe,' said the resultant strangulated gurgle. 'Shall we go and join

Captain Kelligan and your mysterious friend the Doctor in the power

room? Or perhaps you would prefer it if Flight Engineer Thakrar were to

end your life here and now?'

Ìt's no good,' complained the Doctor, slamming down his tools in

exasperation. 'I can't do anything to reverse the shut-down sequence.'

Ì don't understand what prompted it in the first place,' said Norma.

`Same as the navigation buoy,' explained the Doctor. He showed her

a small and insignificant-looking electronic chip that nestled amongst the

force field generator's wiring. 'A telekinetic circuit designed to allow

override control to any external agency blessed with psychic powers.'

Norma looked up at the generator, conscious that she had never given

a thought to the machinery that protected the dredger and the lives of its

crew throughout their time within Jupiter's inhospitable atmosphere.

Never a thought until now, when that magical state of grace was in danger

of being withdrawn. The two, twenty-metre-high tubes of plasma used to

power the magnetic field sat on the computer control station, their purple

glow seeming to diminish with every second. Even the compressed

microdatatape spools appeared to be spinning back and forth at a more

leisurely rate than usual, taking vital nanoseconds longer to process the

billions of gigabytes of data that they normally handled with ease.

`Can't you just remove it?' she asked.

Ì could,' replied the Doctor, 'but I don't think it would make much

difference. I was thinking that maybe you could intervene?'

Ì've already tried that,' Norma smiled. 'Unfortunately I'm telepathic

not telekinetic.'

Òh, well,' sighed the Doctor. 'My own powers, such as they are, aren't

quite up the task either, I'm afraid. We need a good strong burst of

telekinetic energy. Or a top-flight engineer who knows these systems like

the back of his hand.'

Àjay!' exclaimed Norma.

`He'd be ideal,' agreed the Doctor, still concentrating on the tangle of

wires before him, ìf only he were here. But I felt the slight shift in the

dredger's stability as the cargo thruster was launched. Ajay and the others

should be well out of danger by now.'

Norma hardly heard him; she was too absorbed by the sight of the two

people who had just stepped into the power room. Evelyn was slightly

hunched over, her legs staggering this way and that at the bidding of the

huge hand clamped to the back other neck. The pain this was causing

was

evident in her face. What Norma found really hard to accept was that this

pain was being inflicted by Ajay Thakrar, the well-liked gentle giant of the crew.

'Ajay,' she repeated, 'You're the telepath who's been attacking me?'

Ajay's lips peeled back from his perfect white teeth in an unnaturally

chilling smile. 'Think again, Captain Kelligan,' came a thick, guttural

voice.

Norma reached out with her mind, physically recoiling at the

impression she received of the mind controlling Ajay. She could almost

see the cadaverous, weasel-featured Corporation Executive standing there

in person. Hepton.

'Let Evelyn go,' roared the Doctor, charging past Norma towards his

friend and her captor. Ajay's head turned slightly, his strangely bright eyes bearing down on the Doctor who was flung back against the force field

generator. He slid to the floor, stunned.

'Why are you doing all this?' demanded Norma.

'To protect the Corporation's interests, of course,' said Hepton with

Ajay's mouth. 'There is a creature on Jupiter.'

'Creature?'

'A telepathic gestalt entity. I became aware of it living and growing

within the Great Red Spot. We tried to make contact but it just lashed out

at anything coming within reach of its psychic influence. Several

Corporation dredgers were lost.'

'Including Thom's? It wasn't his fault,' she realised with a sense of

elated relief. 'But why blame him?'

'The entity is dangerous. Its influence is expanding, riding on the

storms ofJupiter. If left unchecked, it will bring Lorannan-Ycole's mining

operations to a standstill. It must be utterly destroyed.'

As Hepton spoke, Ajay slowly relaxed his grip on Evelyn's neck. Norma

watched as she slumped to the floor, crawling away to relative safety

behind a control console. A sudden burst of purple light leaped across the

room, hitting Ajay squarely in his massive chest and blasting him to the

ground. Norma could tell he was out cold and turned to see the Doctor

holding one of the generator's power cables before him.

'He'll recover,' he assured her. 'Now, we have to make a last-ditch effort

to save this vessel. Captain, get to the command deck. See if you can get **the** navigation systems *online* and pilot us up and to safety in high orbit.

Evelyn, you go with her.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Evelyn, rising shakily from her hiding

place.

'AU can to repair the force field,' said the Doctor, a note of confidence

in his voice that Norma didn't believe for a second.

* * *

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Panting with the effort of trying to keep up with the younger, fitter woman

and concentrating on staying on her feet as the dredger shook and

lurched, Evelyn stumbled onto the command deck behind Norma. Smoke

was drifting from the small electrical fires burning amongst the wreckage

of the control panels and filling the room. Norma had already taken

a small extinguisher and was tackling the flames. Evelyn spotted a bracket

on the wall nearby and grabbed another extinguisher, spraying its

contents onto the nearest console. She knew then that their position was

hopeless. The technology aboard the dredger might be far in advance of

her own time but even she could see that the computers on the command

deck were beyond repair.

`Look!' called Norma, pointing at the main image screen.

Despite the devastation all around, the screen was still functioning and

showing a view of the ghostly dredger they had been following for so

long. It sat there, shining red as it reflected the crackling electrical storms flashing furiously around it.

Evelyn noticed the smoke swirling around and drawing itself into a

column at the centre of the command deck. It gathered and coalesced into

the figure of a ghostly man. The phantom was tall and grey with

a ruggedly handsome face and the hint of blue shining from his eyes.

Evelyn heard the lilt of his voice as it played across her mind like fingers strumming a harp.

Norma —

—

'Thom,' said Norma, enraptured.

This couldn't be happening, thought Evelyn. Nevertheless, the evidence

of her own eyes suggested that she was seeing the ghost of Norma

Kelligan's dead husband. The voice echoed in her brain as if answering

her unspoken query.

— I am not *dead* —

'Then what are you?' asked Evelyn.

— I am part *of the* Entity — ***My*** mind and being *were absorbed when my ship was destroyed —We* exist in the electrical storm —

'How can you survive out there?' demanded Norma.

— *The* storm is similar to the electrical activity in the human brain — Our natural habitat —

Evelyn was excited by the concept of discovering an entirely ***new*** form of sentient life within the Solar System. Somehow, it pleased her to know

that life was capable of some form of existence even in the most

inhospitable environment the Universe could throw at it. She also felt

comforted by the fact that Thom Kelligan's life had carried on in some

fashion after his own death. It gave her hope.

—*The* Entity *has been on Jupiter for centuries — It was not really sentient* until it *started* to absorb *the minds of the dredger crews* —

`Hepton said the Entity killed the crews,' Norma pointed out.

—It was somewhat *heavy-handed* in its attempts to make contact — It *knew no better* — Hepton *wanted me* to contact it — To control it — I *failed* —

'That's what your last message meant,' realised Evelyn. 'Nothing to do

with drinking too much.'

—The Entity is angry — It will *destroy everything* —

'Can't you stop it?' pleaded Norma.

—It *knows* Hepton wants to kill it — *He intends* to *use* your dredger as a *huge* bomb

— With the *force field gone* it will *explode* and the *volatile gases* will burn *the* Entity away — I cannot control the Entity *alone* — But with your help Norma —

Ì'll come to you,' pledged Norma. As the ghostly shape of Thom

Kelligan began to dissipate, she ran from the command deck.

— I *love you* -

- *I know* you do —

Norma stood within the airlock, her fingers dancing across the control

panel beside the outer hatch, tapping in the code that would open it. She

felt perfectly calm and at peace. She turned back to the inner door at the

dull insistent thumping sound coming from the other side and smiled at

Evelyn, who was hammering at the thick metal, her face stricken.

—*Do* you still trust me? —

She felt the wind tugging at her uniform as the outer hatch opened on

the spectacular vista of the storm. She looked out, marvelling at the

crimson and ochre clouds hurling bolts of electricity at each other. She

felt a light touch on her mind, experienced a warm feeling like returning

home after a long absence.

— To the *other side of eternity, my love* —

She stepped through the open hatch and into a new realm of experience

as the force field flickered and died before her eyes. Thom Kelligan

wrapped his consciousness around his wife and they became truly one for

the first time.

Hepton's head was splitting as he brought all his mental energies to bear

on Ajay Thakrar. He had come too far now to give up easily. The gas

refinery operation on Jupiter had been a huge success and guaranteed his

advancement within the Lorannan-Ycole Corporation. Europa was

a sensible site for the Corporation's base in the Jupiter Division with its access to almost unlimited supplies of frozen water, but you wouldn't

want to live there. Reclining in the telepathic communication booth in his

plush office, Hepton focused on bringing the massive flight engineer

back to full consciousness.

Eventually, his efforts paid off and he saw through Thakrar's eyes as

they blinked open. He could see the back of that meddlesome interloper

the Doctor as he worked at restoring power to the force field generator.

He sensed the Doctor's belief that he was within reach of achieving his

goal.

Taking control of Thakrar's body, he hauled the big man to his feet and

lurched across to the Doctor. He enjoyed the look of agony on the

Doctor's face as Thakrar's huge hands spun him about and closed around

his throat.

The Doctor's face was turning *blue,* his legs giving way beneath him when Ajay's eyes told Hepton that the force field generator had

reactivated. He cast the Doctor aside and raised Thakrar's arms, about to

bring them smashing down on the generator's control panel.

The last thing Hepton felt was a scream of pure anger searing through

his mind. For one terrible instant he was Thom Kelligan and he was being

shredded by the explosion that ripped through the fabric of his dredger,

tearing it apart.

The shock overloaded his brain. There was an all-consuming flash of

light and nothing more.

`She just went outside,' explained Evelyn, still trying to come to terms with Norma's death.

The Doctor was sitting on the floor where she had found him semi-

conscious when she returned to the power room. The force field generator was humming powerfully and, according to the Doctor, the dredger was rising steadily up from Jupiter's atmosphere.

Ì think the generator was reactivated telekinetically,' the Doctor told her. 'Just at the point when the dredger should have been destroyed.'

`Norma?' asked Evelyn. 'Or an act of self-preservation by the Entity?'

The Doctor cocked his head to one side, eyes closed, a slight smile playing on his lips. It was, thought Evelyn, as if he were listening to an inner voice.

Ì think Norma has brought a new sense of balance and harmony to the Entity,' he reported. 'Let's call it Jove.'

Evelyn felt a tickling sensation deep within her brain and knew that the part of the Entity that had been Norma Kelligan would have approved.

Àjay can tell the rest of humanity about Jove,' the Doctor said.

The flight engineer was sitting up, a pained expression on his big face, massaging his head. All he had said so far was: 'Too much beer.'

`With a bit of luck Jove will be allowed to exist peacefully,' continued the Doctor. 'It may even be able to provide some assistance to the human race in exchange. I'm sure a mutually beneficial arrangement can be sorted out now that there's a friendly diplomatic contact in place as it were.'

Evelyn was hit by the sudden certainty that Norma still lived as part of

Jove and that she had rejoined her husband. They would be together for

all eternity. That gave Evelyn a warm feeling inside.

Ì do so love a happy ending,' she said, with a smile.

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Saturn

Al ison Lawson

An ***Aduenture of the*** Fifth Doctor,

with Nyssa *ofTraken*

À pot of tea for two, please,' said the Doctor, smiling broadly at the robot waiter. Returning the smile, the waiter retreated from the warm sunshine

of the pavement cafe back into the relative cool of the kitchen.

Nyssa took in her surroundings and shielded her eyes from the sun as

she watched people walking by. 'This is very pleasant, Doctor. It makes

a very welcome change to find somewhere where the people all seem to be happy and the elements are not automatically ranged against us.'

`Really, Nyssa,' admonished the Doctor. 'You make it sound as if we

never have a day off.'

Nyssa raised an eyebrow.

Officers Buc and Huc patrolled their beat with the relaxed comfort that

comes with knowing it isn't very likely for a crime to be committed on

your watch and, even if one were committed, it would probably be so

small or so easily dealt with that there need be no worries. They enjoyed

their work. Saturnites felt safe to see them on patrol, dressed in their

smart dark green uniforms and matching caps, discreetly carrying their

seldom-used handguns in holsters under their jackets.

It was as they were strolling along a path in the pleasure gardens that

the alarm went off. No one could hear it, of course, but both officers felt

it simultaneously — the vibrate alarm integral to their communicators

buzzed virtually silently, alerting them, and only them, to the incident.

`Looks like we've got a denial in progress,' said Buc. 'Haven't had one

of those in a while.'

`Where is it?' asked Huc, as his colleague adjusted controls on his

communicator to find the miscreant's location with the built-in tracker.

`Not far from here. Sector two. Better get over there.'

Quickening their pace slightly, the officers headed away from the

pleasure gardens and out onto the streets.

Nyssa sipped her tea and wondered how the Doctor could drink his so

quickly without scalding his throat.

Ànd although I'd heard about a utopian society on Saturn in the forty-

seventh century,' he was saying. 'I'd never managed to fit in a visit, and

now we're here...'

He had been talking for some time, but the sunshine was so warm and

the air so sweet, that Nyssa found she wasn't really concentrating on what

he was saying. She watched as a young couple of about her own age

approached the cafe. **A slender woman with shoulder-length dark hair**

and deep brown eyes, and **a slightly stocky man with short black hair and brown eyes. Nyssa** realised suddenly that all **the Saturnites seemed to have dark hair and brown** eyes. Catching the eye of the woman, Nyssa smiled, and the woman smiled back.

Ì wonder how they stabilise the surface and maintain the atmosphere,'

the Doctor was saying, talking chiefly to himself.

Nyssa could see that the young couple could find no table to sit at, so

she **waved at them, smiling.**

`Who are you waving at?' asked the Doctor, breaking off from his Saturn

monologue.

`Why don't you sit with us?' called Nyssa in the couple's direction.

There were two spare seats at the table. The couple made their way over

and settled themselves next to the Doctor and Nyssa.

`Thank you very much!' said the woman. 'It's such a beautiful day to sit

outside, isn't it?'

`Come off it, Hel,' said the man. 'It's a beautiful day every day!' They

smiled big smiles at the Doctor and Nyssa.

`So,' continued the man, 'where are you from? You're not local, are

you?' His question was directed at the Doctor.

`No. Actually, we're not from round here,' said the Doctor evasively.

Ì'm the Doctor and this is Nyssa.' With several 'how-do-you-do's, the

four shook hands and **the Saturnites introduced themselves as Hel**

and

Keet.

`Well, **I think another pot of tea is called for!' said the Doctor.**

Lors looked out from the hiding place to check the coast was clear.

Nodding, he returned to the rest of his small group. They stood together,

afraid and unsure whether what they were doing was right.

Ìt's okay. There's no-one about,' Lors said. He was met with a tangible

lack of enthusiasm. 'Perhaps just two of us should go — myself and Balch.

We're the fittest.' Lors pulled himself as upright as he could in the

cramped conditions, trying to look as fit as he claimed to be. His thin,

wrinkled skin and arthritic hands gave away his age more than the stoop.

The group continued to look miserable. 'Look, you'll feel a lot better

when you've had something to eat,' he said encouragingly.

One of the group began to cry piteously. 'But to steal, Lors. To sink so

low,' she said quietly.

Ì know, Keen, I know. But we have no choice. You don't want to retire,

do you?' The crying continued.

`But we didn't know it would be like this.'

Turning from Keen, Lors indicated that he and Raich should

make

a **move. 'Come on, while there's no one watching.'**

Together, the pair looked out again from their hiding place — a disused

cellar with a hatch leading to street level. After the darkness of the cellar, the bright daylight made their eyes sting. Across the street they could see a market stall of colourful, ripe fruit and vegetables. It was a mouth-watering sight to people who had not eaten for two days.

`Right,' said Lors. 'We make a quick dash, grab what we can and then

dash straight back, okay?'

Raich looked apprehensive, but took his hand and squeezed it gently to

show she agreed. In her other hand she held a large hemp shopping bag.

She turned back to Keen and the fourth member of the group, Wend.

`Don't worry. We'll be as quick as we can,' she said. Reen and Wend

looked miserably at her, and nodded.

Lors had the hatch open and was ready to clamber out onto the street.

`Come on,' he said. 'Let's go.'

Raich and Lors climbed the rickety stairs as quietly as possible to street level, their old bones seeming to creak more than the wooden steps. Once

in the open, they looked up and down the street then made a hobbling

dash for the fruit stall. Grabbing as many pieces of fruit and vegetables as possible, the pair soon filled the bag and were back on their way to the

cellar hatch, wheezing with effort. In a matter of minutes they were back with the others, in the dark.

`Look what we've got!' exclaimed Lors gleefully.

The others, although clearly hungry, still looked miserable as Lors

handed out some fruit. He looked around the group and, despite their

success with finding food without being discovered, his heart sank. He

looked at Raich, starting hungrily on a stolen pear. When *he* closed his eyes, he could still see her as she had been when they had first met — so young and beautiful, with rich, thick hair and sparkling eyes. And now,

thanks to him, she sat hungry in a cellar, her dim eyes fixed on the middle distance and her thin hair unkempt. What must she think ofhim? Lors ate

his fruit sadly, wondering what they would do next. How long could they

survive like this, with nowhere to live, having to scavenge for food? How long could he keep up their spirits, preserve their dignity?

`Thank you, Lors,' said Reen suddenly. 'Thank you for getting the food

for us.' There was an awkward pause before she continued. 'But Wend

and I have been talking and we think we want to go to the shuttle.'

Lors was aghast. 'The shuttle! Why? You can stay here and live the life

you've always led!'

`No, Lors, we can't,' said Reen. 'This isn't life. We've had enough and

we want to retire.'

Tut you said that you wanted to stay,' put in Raich. 'Why have you

changed your minds?'

'teen and Wend looked at each other and then back at their friends. 'I'm

sorry,' said Wend. 'We don't want to let you down, but we're tired and now

that we've tried staying here, we have decided that it's not fair on other

people if we stay. We've had our fair share. It's time to go.'

`But —' began Raich.

`No, it's all right,' said Lors wearily. 'I understand. Maybe it would be

better if we all went together.'

Wend and Keen perked up at this. 'What about you, Raich? What do you

think?' asked Reen.

Ìf it's what we all want, then, yes, let's go. I don't think any of us want

to live like this. Retirement can be no worse, can it?' Raich looked to Lors for reassurance, as she always had done.

`No,' he said. 'It can't be any worse. We'll finish eating then go straight

over to the shuttle.'

Hel and Keet had turned out to be charming and interesting people,

happy to talk to strangers. Playing the 'we're visitors' card, the Doctor had found out much about the Saturn society.

`So the stories of a Saturn utopia were all true,' he said. 'Nobody wants

for anything and you live a peaceful life of plenty. Seems rather contrary to life as we know it, somehow.'

`Nonsense, Doctor,' said Nyssa. 'It's like Traken. You just always expect

the worst.'

`Hello, what are the police doing here?' asked Hel. All four looked up in

the direction of the approaching officers. 'I wonder what's going on?'

continued Hel.

Ì thought there was no crime here?' asked the Doctor.

`We didn't say that, exactly,' said Keet. 'It's just that crime occurs so

seldom and is dealt with so swiftly that it's hardly worth mentioning.'

pondered the Doctor. 'Well, someone around here has clearly

attracted the attention of the police.'

Às long as it's not us, for a change,' muttered Nyssa to herself.

The officers seemed to be heading straight for their table. Nyssa

groaned. It was them who had attracted attention after all. They probably

didn't have some vital visitors' passes or something.

The officers stopped at their table. 'Good afternoon,' said one of them,

Ì am officer Buc and this is officer Huc of district 3 Police Force.'

Several polite 'good afternoons' were exchanged. Buc turned to the

Doctor and spoke to him directly. 'I wonder if you might answer a few

questions for me, sir,' he said. Nyssa was only slightly surprised that it

was the Doctor that was the centre of attention. Guided by previous

experience, she kept quiet, letting the Doctor handle the situation.

`Yes, of course,' replied the Doctor. 'How may I help?'

`Would you mind telling me how old you are, sir?'

Baffled by this question, the Doctor repeated, 'How old I am? Why do you need to know that?'

`Just answer the question please, sir,' said Huc.

`Well, I suppose I must be getting on for about Boo years old,' hazarded the Doctor with a cautious smile.

Hel and Keet burst into laughter. 'You can't possibly be that old!' said Keet. 'You don't look a day over thirty. Surgery I suppose.'

Èr, thanks very much,' said the Doctor.

'If we could return to the questions, sir,' said Buc, frowning at Keet for interrupting. 'Can you explain why you are not in retirement on Titan?'

Again the Doctor was clearly confused. 'I'm sorry, officer, but I really don't understand what you mean.'

Àre you claiming to know nothing of retirement?' asked Buc.

Ì suppose so,' said the Doctor.

Nyssa and the Doctor exchanged a confused look.

`Looks like we've got a clear case of denial, Huc,' said Buc, apparently concluding the questions. He began tapping buttons on a communicator,

or it could have been a hand-held computer. Nyssa wasn't sure.

Hel and Keet looked horrified. Nyssa could stay quiet no longer. 'Just what is going on here?' she hissed at Hel. 'What is the Doctor accused of?

Denying what?'

Hel's expression turned to astonishment at Nyssa's words. Nyssa

deduced that silence was, after all, the better option.

Buc turned to the Doctor. 'I am arresting you for denial of retirement. You will accompany us to the shuttle.' He motioned for the Doctor to **stand,** but the Doctor remained seated.

Ì'm sorry, officer, but I'm not at all sure what crime, if any, I've committed,' he said.

`We'll explain it to you on the way to Titan,' said Buc, casting his eyes about. He was clearly concerned that this arrest was attracting too much attention.

`Titan!' said the Doctor in surprise. He rose to his feet. 'Now, look here,

officer. I'm more than happy to accompany you and your colleague to your station, but I have no intention of leaving the planet!'

Buc looked over at Huc, who unholstered his handgun and pointed it at the Doctor. 'Don't force me to use it, sir,' Huc said quietly.

`This is preposterous!' said the Doctor hotly. 'I've done nothing wrong!'

Then, with a gasp and a look of astonishment, he fell at the officers' feet, a small dart visible in his neck.

Huc reholstered his handgun. 'I thought he'd never shut up,' he said.

`Doctor!' exclaimed Nyssa. 'Doctor, wake up!' She shook his body, but he remained inert. Then she felt Keet's strong hands pulling her away.

`Don't get involved,' *he* murmured. 'He'll be okay.'

Reluctantly, Nyssa watched as Buc and Huc manhandled the prone

form of the Doctor into an upright position, with one of his arms round

each of their shoulders.

`Good afternoon,' said Buc as they left.

Keet held tightly onto Nyssa's arm until they were out of sight. She was

afraid. What was it that had shocked her new friends so much? What sort

of trouble was the Doctor in now?

Lors led the group ofweary pensioners to the shuttle. It stood, as it always did, at the edge of the small shuttle port at the opposite end of town from

the pleasure gardens. As far away from the sources of fun and enjoyment

as possible. Reaching the craft, Lors held up his hand and placed his

thumb in a small indentation next to the hatch marked 'Enter'. The hatch

opened to reveal a space big enough for one person to stand in. He turned

to the others. 'Are you sure this is what you want?' he asked.

`Yes, Lors,' said Raich soothingly. 'Everything will be fine. You'll see.'

She smiled at him.

`We have no idea what will happen after we step through this doorway,'

he said, his tone full of anguish. 'I may never see you again.'

Raich kissed him lightly on his lips. 'You just try and stop me seeing you

again, you old fool. Now, go on.'

Lors turned from her and stepped into the opening. The hatch slid

shut

behind him.

Raich looked over at Reen and Wend. 'Until we meet again on Titan,'

she said. They shook hands, then Raich placed her thumb in the

indentation next to the hatch and, as Lors had done, stepped into the

opening. The point of no return.

After the police officers had gone, carrying the Doctor between them, Hel

and Keet had regained their former cheery outlook very quickly.

`Thank goodness that's over,' said Hel, clearly relieved.

`To think we've been sitting with a denier!' said Keet.

controlling Nyssa stared at them both. 'Is that all you can say?' she asked, barely her anger. 'My friend has just been carted off to Titan for no

reason at all, and you just carry on with your tea and cake?'

Keet looked annoyed. 'Come on, Nyssa. The guy was clearly well over

hundred, even though he looked younger.'

Ànd that's a crime?' asked Nyssa.

Hel looked confused. 'You know it is! Dear me, Nyssa, how peculiar that

you don't know the law. Come on, we've finished our tea. Let's go to the

pleasure gardens for some fun.'

Àm I missing something?' asked Nyssa. 'Or do you two not understand

the situation? I need to find my friend and get him away from here.'

of `You know perfectly well where he is,' said Keet testily. He was

bored

her now. 'He'll be on the Titan shuttle and by evening he'll be enjoying his retirement exactly where he should have been for — if you can believe

him — the last 700 years.'

Nyssa stared at him in blank amazement.

don't `Forget about him, Nyssa,' said Hel lightly. 'We'll be your friends, if you district

have any others. We'll show you round, if you're not from this

.' She beckoned to the robot waiter, who came over to the table.

We'd like to pay, please,' she said.

Ì can't believe you're just carrying on as normal,' said Nyssa angrily.

Ànd I can't believe you're still going on about it,' said Keet. 'Just stop

bleating and get on with your life. You've got years before you have to retire.'

Hel pressed her thumb onto the waiter's electronic notebook and it

emitted a small bleep to indicate the transaction was complete. She

turned to Nyssa. Ìf you don't want to come to the gardens, why don't you

Come over later. We're having a party to celebrate our new baby.'

`But don't come if you're going to be miserable about some old geezer

who should have retired years ago,' added Keet.

`Keet!' admonished Hel. 'Maybe she didn't know how old he was. Don't

be so cruel.' She turned to Nyssa again and handed her a plastic card.

Here's our address. The party's at seven o'clock. Come on, Keet.' She

stood up and walked off, Keet following her.

Nyssa watched them go, stunned by their reactions. She had to find

the

Doctor, which meant she had to find the Titan shuttle. She left the café in

the direction the officers had gone.

The Doctor came round slowly, blinking his eyes until his vision cleared

Ind shaking feeling into his tingling hands and feet.

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The drug wears off most slowly through the extremities,' explained

Buc. 'So you may have pins and needles for a while.'

The Doctor looked up to see Buc and Huc sitting opposite him, in front

ofa rank of upright cubicles. Each cubicle held what looked like an elderly

person. 'So we're on the shuttle already,' he said. 'Have we left Saturn?'

`Not yet,' replied Huc. 'It needs two more for a full consignment. Then

it can leave.'

`Stand up,' said Buc. The Doctor stood, shakily.

`Now that you're conscious, we can get you into a cubicle and get back

to our work.

`Can't I just travel to Titan as I am?' asked the Doctor. 'I don't like the

look of those cubicles. They have an air of cryogenics about them, and I'm

sure it can't be a long journey.'

Buc sighed. 'Come on now, sir. Let's get this over with. Ifyou would just

step into the cubicle. The process doesn't work on unconscious people,

so we need your cooperation. If you have a grievance, you can sort it out

on Titan.'

`Will there be someone there who can send me back?' asked the Doctor.

`That's not for me to say, sir. That's Titan's business. But the only way

out of the shuttle is on Titan.'

The Doctor looked at the officers. He could rush them, try to get out,

but they both had dart guns. He'd just be putting off the inevitable. He

may as well go to Titan and sort things out there. Nyssa would be fine on

her own for a few hours.

Àll right, officer,' he said finally, and stepped into the cubicle. A clear

screen slid across the front of the cubicle, which began rapidly to fill with freezing gas.

As he lost awareness of his surroundings, the Doctor could hear Buc

and Huc leaving the capsule.

Ì hope I can accept it when my time comes,' Huc was saying.

`You'll be fine, Huc,' Buc replied. 'It's not the real end, is it?' His voice faded away and the Doctor knew only darkness and silence.

Nyssa had caused a stir in asking directions to the shuttle. It seemed she

was asking what everyone must already know. She made her way quickly

to the shuttle port and could see the shuttle clearly. It was marked 'Titan

shuttle'. As she got closer, she could hear two elderly women talking

outside a hatch marked 'Enter'.

`You can't be scared now, Keen,' said one.

`But I am!' whined the other. 'Wend, what if Lors is right and we do never see each other again? What if there really is no retirement?'

`Look around you,' said the first soothingly. 'There must be, mustn't there? How else is all this here?'

Gradually, the cautious one calmed herself and took her friend's hand. 'I'll always love you, Wend,' she said. Then she turned and pressed her thumb into a small indentation near the 'Enter' hatch. The hatch slid open and the woman stepped inside. A moment later, when the hatch had shut again, the second woman followed the first and disappeared inside **the** shuttle.

Nyssa walked smartly up to the hatch and pressed her thumb in the indentation. Nothing happened. She tried her other thumb. Still nothing.

Then the shuttle began to vibrate gently. Nyssa stepped back. `No, wait!' she shouted. The vibration became more marked and the sound of engines firing erupted from the craft. Nyssa was forced to back away, as **the** craft began to lift off, creating a swirl of dust in the air. In a matter of minutes, it was out of sight. Gone to Titan, with the Doctor inside it.

The Doctor awoke to find himself in what felt like a dentist's waiting room. He sat alongside many pensioners, all of whom looked slightly confused and some of whom looked rather upset.

`So this is Titan,' he said. 'Not quite what I was expecting.'

A woman in a smart white suit entered the room. She held a clipboard

and, casting her eyes down towards it and back up again, said, Tors and Doctor.'

The Doctor stood up. All the pensioners seemed to be examining

narrow metal bands round their wrists. The Doctor looked at his own

wrists and, sure enough, there was a band round his left wrist. It was

engraved with 'Doctor. 3885774941o.'

Slowly, another man rose to his feet. 'I'm Lors,' he said uncertainly.

Ànd I'm the Doctor.' The Doctor offered a handshake, but Lors looked

at his outstretched arm uncomprehendingly.

`This way please,' said the woman in the suit. 'You've both been

allocated to litter and refuse.' She turned and walked off, expecting the

men to follow. Lors followed her, unquestioning.

As there was no other way out of the room, the Doctor followed, too.

The district police station was not difficult to find, and after a short while Nyssa's patience for waiting on a visitors' bench was rewarded by the

arrival of officers Buc and Huc.

'Excuse me, officers,' she said. 'Can you tell me how I can get in touch

with my friend who was taken to Titan today? I can't seem to get into the **shuttle.** My thumbprint wouldn't work.'

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Buc laughed. 'You're far too young to be able to get into the shuttle! If

you want to get in touch, send him an e-letter. We had to give him an ID

as he seemed to have lost his. That's not unusual with the elderly. What

was it, Huc?'

Huc reached in his pocket for his notebook and read out a number,

while Buc wrote it down on a card for Nyssa.

`There you are miss. Now, don't forget that he'll probably be a bit

confused,' said Buc kindly.

Nyssa thought that the Doctor could hardly be more confused about the

situation than she was herself; but thanked the officers and left to find

a place from which she could send an e-letter. Hel and Keet would help her.

Lors and the Doctor sat in front of large colour monitors, looking at live

pictures of the pleasure gardens in Districts 3 and 7, respectively. Using the controls on the panels in front of them, they had been instructed how

to operate small robots collecting litter by day, and larger robots emptying bins and disposing of refuse by night.

`Well,' said Lors, 'perhaps it isn't as bad as I thought it would be.' The

man had regained his strength and seemed more aware of his

surroundings than he had an hour previously, in the waiting room.

`Why? What were you expecting?' asked the Doctor.

`The worst-case scenario was that retirement was a myth and that there

was only death in the shuttle,' replied Lors. He paused, then continued.

`No, the worst-case scenario wasn't death. It was life without Raich.'

`Raich?'

`My wife. She must be here somewhere.'

Ànd this is retirement, is it? Picking up litter?' asked the Doctor.

`There are worse jobs we could have been allocated,' said Lors, using

his control panel to tip a wheelie bin into a refuse truck.

`But why can't all this work be done on Saturn?' pressed the Doctor.

`Why ship the pensioners off to Titan to do it?'

Lors half smiled. 'Because we don't fit any more. We're not aesthetically

pleasing and we spoil all the fun with a constant reminder of old age,

disability and death round the corner.'

`You don't sound convinced of that,' observed the Doctor.

Ì didn't want to come here. I wanted to stay on Saturn, enjoying the life

I was used to. Now there is nothing more for me, and for all the others on

Titan, than working to keep Saturnites happy in their life of plenty.'

`But not all the work is done from Titan,' said the Doctor. 'There are

police officers working on Saturn for a start.'

`There are a few jobs for those who want to do them. There are perks

associated with the jobs, but they're not worth it. Whether you work or

not, you still retire when you reach 100 , so why bother?' Lors sounded

bitter and defeated.

The Doctor picked up a discarded newspaper by remote control and dropped it in a litter bin. 'How about we escape?' he asked lightly.

Nyssa found Hel and Keet in the pleasure gardens, submerged in a jacuzzi and drinking colourful cocktails.

'Nyssa!' exclaimed Hel. 'I'm so glad you decided to join us after all.'

`Hello again,' returned Nyssa.

`Why don't you get in?' asked Keet. 'There are plenty of towels. I'll get you a cocktail.' He gestured at a robot waiter.

On Titan, Raich operated the robot waiter and took the order for three cocktails. As the customer pressed his thumb into the waiter's notepad, the payment for the drinks was transferred automatically from his bank account to that of the pleasure gardens catering company.

'No, thank you,' said Nyssa, declining the cocktail. 'I think I'll just sit here for a bit instead.'

'Suit yourself,' said Keet ungraciously, downing both his own and Nyssa's cocktail.

Hel smiled up at Nyssa, who had perched on the side of the jacuzzi. `Do you feel better about your friend now?'

`Yes, I do,' said Nyssa. 'But I'd like to send him an e-letter. Do you know somewhere I can do that?'

'Why don't you come back to our place and do it from our console? We're about to leave here anyway. The party is in an hour or so and we

need to get ready,' said Hel.

Àll right,' replied Nyssa. 'Thank you.'

When Lors had stopped laughing, the Doctor asked why escape was so

out of the question.

`Because the only way back is in the shuttle, and we can't just go over

there and get in it. And because life is difficult on Saturn for me now.'

`How so?' asked the Doctor.

Lors held out his left hand and showed the Doctor a black patch on the

pad of his thumb. 'The thumbprint doesn't work after 100 . It's designed **to cut** out. You can't pay for anything on Saturn — no food, no drink, it nothing. You can't even open the front door to your house. The only thing will operate is the shuttle to Titan.'

À one-way ticket,' murmured the Doctor.

They sat in silence a short while, then the Doctor spoke again. 'There

must be some way of reactivating your thumbprint. If we could find a way

to do that, it would be worth returning to Saturn, wouldn't it?' He needed

Lors to go with him — he needed a Saturnite's thumbprint to open the

shuttle hatch.

Lors shook his head. 'It's not possible.'

Tut my ship is on Saturn,' said the Doctor. 'I'm sure I'll be able to get

your thumbprint to function again if I have access to my laboratory.'

Lors looked up from his work. 'Really?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes, really.'

Lors held his gaze for a long while, clearly thinking hard. 'We'd have to

find Raich, first,' he said finally. 'I'm not going without her.'

The Doctor let out a sigh. He didn't want this to get any more

complicated, but it looked as if it were unavoidable. 'Of course,' he said.

`Here's the plan. I cause a distraction while you find Raich. We'll meet at

the shuttle in an hour's time. All right?'

Lors allowed a little hope to show on his face. 'You're on,' he said.

Hel and Keet had a lovely house. It seemed to Nyssa as if every possible

luxury were installed. While Keet opened packets of pre-prepared food

and opened bottles ofwine for the party, Hel showed Nyssa how to use the

console to send an e-letter.

Òh,' said Hel, as it became clear that Nyssa's identity could not be read

from her thumbprint. 'I think your print has broken! I've never heard of

that before.'

Nyssa thought quickly. 'Yes, it's inconvenient. It's an intermittent fault

and I should get round to having it fixed.'

`You can use mine for now,' said Hel, pressing her thumb into a shallow

hole in the console's keyboard. 'There you are — you're in. Just type your

letter and send it to the Doctor's ID number.'

Hel and Keet went to get changed for the party, leaving Nyssa to get

on

with her letter. She was getting somewhere at last.

The Doctor was waiting for the right moment to make his move. There

was a pensioner supervising the work of the others, presumably in return

for some unknown perks. The Doctor needed the man to be quite close by.

Suddenly, a textbox appeared on the screen on the console in front of him.

The text read e-letter received'. Warily, the Doctor used the controls to

select the text box, and was delighted to find an e-letter from Nyssa.

Hello, Doctor

Are you all right? *I'm staying at Hel and Keet's house* tonight, so don't worry about me. How *are* you *going to get* back to Saturn and how *can I help?* Ill. don't hear from you, I'll try to get to Titan and find you.

Nyssa

Quickly, the Doctor typed a reply.

Hello, Nyssa!

Delighted to hear from you! *I'm trapped in* a desk job on Titan, but *hope* to *be* back with you on Saturn by tomorrow morning. *Meet me in the* cafe at lunchtime. Don't try to *come* to Titan. Stay with *Hel and Keet* and try to *keep* out of trouble.

The Doctor

The Doctor sent the message, relieved that Nyssa was in safe hands. Now

all he had to do was cause some havoc as a diversion. The supervisor was

within earshot and in a position where he could plainly see the

Doctor's

screen. Deliberately, the Doctor used the controls on his panel to tip up

a litter bin all over a crazy golf course. Then, he had the litter robot pick **up** some random items of rubbish and stuff them into a woman's

handbag. She screamed, and the Doctor laughed.

`What is the meaning of this?' shouted the supervisor, heading straight

over to the Doctor's position. He jostled Lors out of the way. Lors took his chance and slipped out of the room.

Ì'm just having enormous fun,' said the Doctor, purposely allowing the

litter robot to throw rubbish at passers by in the pleasure gardens.

Ìf you don't stop this irresponsible behaviour immediately, I shall call

for security,' threatened the man.

`Please do!' said the Doctor, smiling broadly.

The supervisor spoke into a communicator on his lapel and, within

▪ minute, two security guards arrived. Clearly, they were not kept very busy **on** Titan.

'What seems to be the problem?' asked one of the guards.

The supervisor merely pointed to the Doctor's screen and the picture of

chaos in the pleasure gardens in District *7*.

see,' said the guard. He turned to the Doctor. 'I think you'd better come with us, sir.'

Ì'd be delighted,' said the Doctor, rising from his seat.

The second guard escorted the Doctor from the room while the first made a note in his notebook and spoke to the supervisor. 'A couple of hours in the cells should calm him down,' he said.

'I hope so,' returned the supervisor. 'I need him back on shift or there'll be a terrible mess in District 7. I'll have to get someone to cover two districts.' He paused. 'Wait a minute — where's the other one?'

`What other one, sir?' asked the guard.

Ì had two new arrivals this morning, and now they've both gone! How am I going to cover two absences?' he asked angrily.

Ì'm sorry, sir, but that's your problem. My problem is to deal with the miscreants. I'll keep you abreast of progress.' He walked swiftly from the

room, leaving the supervisor staring at the litter-strewn gardens and distressed pleasure seekers in the gardens of District 7.

Leaving the room, the security guard almost tripped over the body of his

colleague. Shocked, he checked for a pulse. His colleague was alive, just

unconscious. That blond fellow must have knocked him out and got away.

The guard sighed. His shift was usually so easy.

The Doctor made it to the shuttle bay and could see Lors and an elderly

woman waiting by the entrance hatch. A klaxon began to blare.

Ì think they've missed us!' shouted the Doctor above the noise.

`What on Saturn have you done?' yelled Lors.

`Not now,' returned the Doctor. 'Let's get into the ship!'

Lors pressed his thumb into the indentation next to the hatch and the

door opened to admit one person. 'You first,' he shouted to the Doctor.

The Doctor nodded and stepped into the space.

Lors pressed his thumb again and the hatch opened for a second time,

just as three security guards ran into the shuttle bay.

`Stop right there and move away from the shuttle!' bellowed one of the

guards.

`Quick, Lors!' urged Raich, pushing him into the space. 'You go.'

Ì'm not leaving you!'

`Move away from the shuttle,' shouted the guard again, 'or we'll shoot!'

The hatch closed on Lors, and Raich turned to face the guards, raising

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her hands.

Àll right officers,' she said, her voice trembling. 'I'm moving away.'

As Raich moved towards the guards, still with her hands above her

head, the sound of the shuttle's engines warming up could be heard.

A tear rolled down Raich's cheek.

The party was in full swing. A dozen or so of Hel and Keet's friends had

arrived and they all stood now in the lounge with glasses charged,

Laughing and talking over the music. Nyssa stood by the nibbles, sipping

a bright orange drink that she was sure was probably very bad for her,

even though the others seem to be able to down several glasses with no

obvious ill effects. Keet tapped his glass with a fork and called for silence.

Gradually, people stopped talking and someone turned down the music

so Keet could be heard.

`Thank you all for coming along this evening,' he said. 'As you know,

Hel and I have been happy together for five years now. But we have an

announcement to make.' He paused dramatically. `Hel?'

Hel passed him an envelope, which he opened to reveal a small

certificate. He held the certificate above his head so everyone could see it.

Smiling from ear to ear, he continued. `Hel and I are delighted to tell you that we've had a baby!'

The assembled crowd let out whoops of delight, cheering and clapping

and shouting congratulations, as Hel and Keet smiled and accepted their

friends' good wishes gracefully. The certificate was passed round so all

could see it, and finally it found its way to Nyssa. She looked at it in

bewilderment.

`Congratulations,' she said to Hel. 'What is your baby's name?'

Èr,' said Hel, 'it's on the card somewhere.' She took the certificate from Nyssa and said, 'Yes — there it is. He's called Paul.'

Nyssa almost choked on her drink. How could Hel not know her own

baby's name?

Àre you all right?' asked Hel.

`Yes, fine,' said Nyssa. 'Is Paul sleeping or can we see him?'

A few people nearby stared at her. One of them laughed. 'Did you hear

that? She wants to see the baby!' The laughing increased.

Keet came over to join Hel and Nyssa. 'Don't spoil things, Nyssa,' he

said.

Ì'm sorry,' said Nyssa. 'I just wanted to see the baby, but if he's

sleeping...'

Keet sighed loudly. 'You know perfectly well that none of us will ever see him.' Keet turned to those assembled. 'Paul will be

joining us on Saturn

In twenty years. Let's drink to his health. To Paul!'

Nyssa watched in astonishment as Keet, Hel and all their friends raised

their glasses in a toast, then resumed their chatting and drinking.

`So where is Paul?' she asked Hel, cutting across the chatter.

Hel looked strangely at Nyssa. 'On Titan, of course,' she said. 'He'll come to Saturn when he's twenty just as we all did.'

Òh, I see,' said Nyssa. 'You're adopting a baby, but he won't live with you until he's twenty.'

Hel laughed. `Nyssa, you are strange! No, we'll never meet him. This certificate is all we need — it proves our gene stock was considered good enough for reproduction.'

Nyssa was appalled. `So you don't actually have a baby at all. Just a certificate.'

`That's right,' said Hel, puzzled by Nyssa's comments. 'Why would we want anything else? Excuse me, I must go and refill people's glasses.'

Nyssa watched in amazement as Hel moved from person to person, filling their glasses and smiling, happily celebrating her worthy genes.

Suddenly, Nyssa missed her mother and father very much. She put down her drink and slipped out of the house into the street. Some time alone and some fresh air would probably perk her up.

The shuttle was already halfway back to Saturn. Lors was not happy.

`Why didn't she come?' he asked, miserably.

`Perhaps because she knew it was you who really wanted to go,' said the

Doctor, not really aware of the effect of his words.

Lors sat heavily on a seat in the cockpit and stared out at the stars in

silence. The Doctor got up and went through to the hold — the

compartment in which he had made the trip to Titan. He found to his

surprise that the cryogenic capsules were full of young people, all of them

looking barely out of their teens. A feeling of crawling revulsion made its

way down his spine as he added up the facts. He returned to the cockpit.

`No people are born on Saturn and none die there — is that right?' he

asked.

`That's right,' said Lors, still staring literally into space.

Ànd people are kept on Titan until they are adult and ready to go to

Saturn and live a life of plenty.'

`That's the idea,' confirmed Lors. 'Until you're too old, like me.'

Ìt's horrible,' said the Doctor with feeling. 'Society can't function like

that.'

Ìt does, though,' said Lors simply.

The Doctor sat down next to Lors in the cockpit. 'The sooner Nyssa and

I are away from this place, the better,' he said, his voice showing the

disgust he felt at the way the Saturnites had ordered their society.

`Doctor,' said Lors, quietly. 'We choose this way.'

They travelled in silence for a while, as Saturn became ever larger on the forward screen.

Lors broke the silence. 'I want to go back.'

`That's where we're going,' said the Doctor.

`No, I want to go back to Titan. You remember my worst-case scenario?

What use is it for me to carry on "living a life of plenty", as you put it, on Saturn, when the one thing I love is on Titan? Life is nothing for me

without Raich. I have learned that much at least.'

Àll right, Lors,' said the Doctor. 'I understand. Just stay on the shuttle when we get to Titan and get into one of the capsules when the "cargo" is unloaded.'

Silence fell again as the Doctor brought the shuttle in to land.

Hel found Nyssa standing outside on her own.

'I brought you a sandwich and a drink,' she said.

'Thank you,' said Nyssa, accepting both with a sad smile.

`Why are you sad?' asked Hel. 'It is a time of celebration for us.'

Nyssa took a bite of sandwich and chewed hard, controlling her tears.

'I miss my family,' she said finally. Hel looked blankly at her.

Ì miss my mother and father,' Nyssa clarified. 'Especially my father. We

used to have such fun together and spend so much time talking, especially after mother died. I'll never forget him. Both he and mother are here in my heart. But you don't seem to have a family —you don't know whose genetic

stock made you, and you won't know your son.'

Hel looked slightly confused. 'Tell me more about your family,' she said.

The next morning, Nyssa went early to the cafe, rather than wait until

lunchtime, and was relieved to find the Doctor was already there.

`Ready to go?' he asked.

`Yes,' said Nyssa. 'More than ready.'

They spoke little as they walked back to where the TARDIS was hidden,

behind a billboard advertising an amusements park. Once inside the

console room, the Doctor swiftly operated the controls to dematerialise

the ship.

'Goodbye Saturn,' he said grimly.

Nyssa joined him at the console. 'They have no concept of family,' said

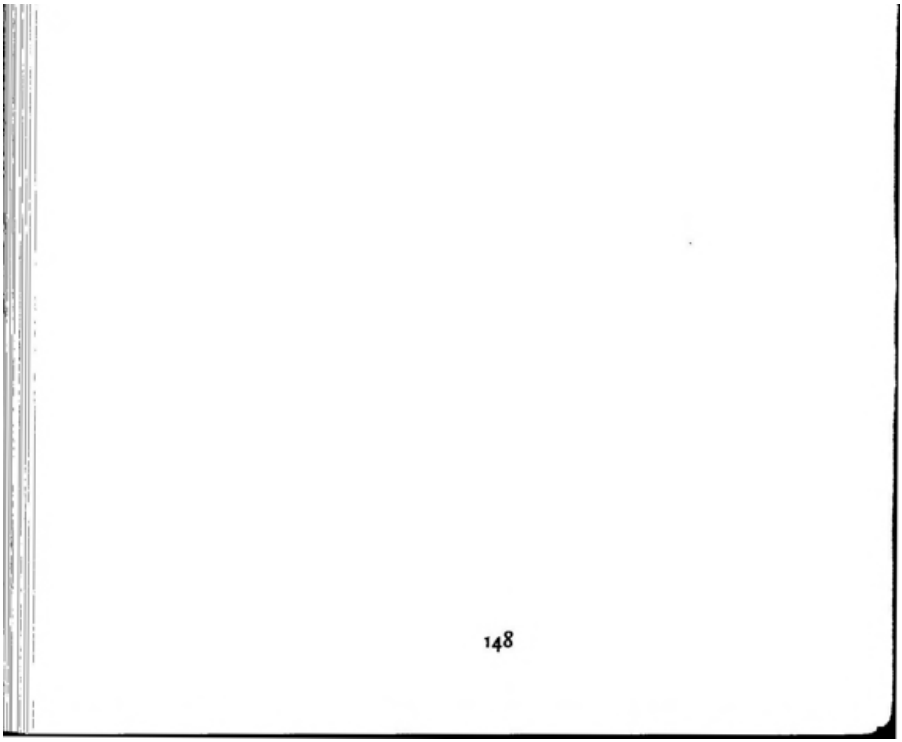
Nyssa. 'Their lives are so empty.'

The Doctor drew in a deep breath. 'But as one of them said to me, they

choose this way of life. And most of them seem happy about it.'

'Are they? Hel and Keet will never even know their own baby,' countered

Nyssa.



The Doctor shrugged. 'It's their choice,' he said gently.

Nyssa's eyes pricked with tears. 'You're very good at the explanations,

Doctor. But you can't empathise, can you?' She left the console room for

her own.

The Doctor looked at the door that Nyssa had shut behind her. 'Maybe

I can't empathise with family,' he murmured. 'But I can empathise with

loss.'

Keet found Hel crying into a soaked tissue.

'Whatever's the matter?' he asked, embracing her and stroking her hair

gently.

`This,' she said, thrusting the baby certificate at him.

Keet frowned. 'What about it?' he asked.

Ìs it enough?' she asked between sobs. She turned her face up to his

and looked at him with reddened eyes. 'Is all this enough ifwe shall never

know Paul?'

Keet didn't understand — yet — but he held Hel tight while she cried.

Uranus

Craig Hinton

An Adventure of the *Seuenth* Doctor,

with *Melanie Bush*

Ladies, gentlemen and non-terrestrial *passengers,* this is your captain speaking.

Please return to your seats *as we* will be making the jump to *hyperspace* in *_five* minutes. Passengers requiring warp-sedation, *please* make your presence known to **the** *stewards immediately*.

'I still don't see why we couldn't have just materialised on Cressida in the **first place,' whispered** Mel, as the green-clad steward ushered them out **of the observation bubble and back to the serried rows of blue leather chairs In the main body of the stub-nosed shuttle. 'Surely it would have been**

easier than this?'

'And draw attention to ourselves?' The Doctor paused to tip his hat at an enormously large woman who was obviously desperate to reach her seat,

regardless of who was in her way. Mel squeezed against the bulkhead to

let her pass, trying to rid her mind of words such as 'diet', 'exercise' and

'rude old bag' as she did so.

'Mel — Cressida is tiny. It's a little red blob about forty miles

across.

Hardly room to swing a cat in. Ooomph!' The woman's juggernaut

presence had jammed the Doctor into one of the toilets, and Mel had to

grab his umbrella by the handle and yank him out.

'Thank you,' he gasped. 'Now — seats!' He pointed along the aisle with

his umbrella, looking like some ancient mariner sighting land.

Mel slid into the soft upholstery and buckled herself in, trying not to

crease her favourite organza ball-gown in the process. She glanced out of the window, pleased to see that the view was the same as it was from every portside window in the shuttle: the majestic bulk of Jupiter, its turbulent atmosphere hypnotic as its clouds of reds and beiges gently swirled and

ebbed in psychedelic patterns. She could even see the planet's delicate

ring structure, dark bands against the light.

If you could apply the words 'gently' and 'delicate' to something like

Jupiter: 400-mile-an-hour gale-force winds, and a nuclear furnace at its

core second only to the Sun. But even that knowledge didn't prevent her

from saying a silent prayer of thanks that she had met this mad, erratic man who was able to show her such marvels.

The Doctor must have read her mind 'Magnificent, isn't it? Deep below

those clouds, huge creatures like electrified manta-rays rise and swoop,

preying on shoals of magnetised krill, whilst wind-borne plants feed on

hydrocarbon mist and neutrino rain. An entire ecosystem beyond human

comprehension.'

'Really?'

The Doctor touched his chin. 'Well, that's what I was told by... well,

someone I knew once. Sort of. Always meant to visit and find out for

myself. That's the trouble with hearsay — sometimes it's so much better

than the real thing!' He tapped his umbrella on the carpet. 'Now, say

goodbye to Io — we'll be jumping in a moment. I can feel the engines

powering up for the warp-shunt. You might want to suck a boiled sweet.'

He proffered a crumpled bag of barley sugars. 'It'll stop your ears

popping.'

Mel took a sweet, then craned her neck to catch a glimpse of their

starting point: sadly, it was hard to be as poetic about Io, considering that it looked like a giant cheese and tomato pizza. Somewhere down there in

one of the mozzarella seas, the TARDIS was patiently waiting for them in

a futuristic broom cupboard.

And then Io was gone. Jupiter was gone. Space was gone, to be replaced

by a grey void. Mel shuddered as her body — along with the rest of the

shuttle and its passengers — translated out of Euclidean space into the

warped physics of hyperspace. It was grey: the grey ofwet winter days, the

grey of school uniforms, the grey of old Pathe newsreels. A depressing

grey that tugged at you.

Mel pulled herself away from the nauseous mass of hyperspace, which

now looked like cold porridge but was somehow even less appetising.

`So, what's so special about Cressida?'

The Doctor's hat was now over his face. 'In the forty-first century —

which is our current temporal locale — Cressida is no longer a moon in the

strictest sense. The dedicated men and women of the Federation Corps of

Engineers mined it out about fifty years ago and turned it into a spaceship.'

`They turned a planet into a spaceship? I suppose it's original.'

`Hardly original and hardly a planet. Hardly a moon, come to that.

Cressida was an asteroid, captured by Uranus' gravity a long, long time

ago. Its orbit was all over the place. The Federation simply reined it in

a bit. But landing there would have been a little too obvious. People would

have seen us arrive, questions would have been asked... oh, you know.'

Mel sighed. This was the same Doctor who thought nothing of

materialising his TARDIS in the middle of Trafalgar Square just before

New Year's Eve! Twice! Still, there was probably a method in his madness.

Probably. Hopefully.

`Cressida's now used to fine-tune the Hub. I presume you recall what

that is?' he snorted through his brim.

`Memory like an elephant, remember?' The Doctor had plonked

a weighty tome in front of her just before the TARDIS had landed on Io:

The Look and *Learn Book of Galactic Civilisations:* AD 3000-5000. It hadn't taken her long — simplistic prose style but very nice illustrations — and there, with great fanfare in the year 40r0, was the Hub. A trans-light energy beam from the Sun to the North Pole of Uranus which acted as the

transmitter for all Federation communications across the Galaxy. A sort

of Crystal Palace in space. And only possible because Uranus rotated at

ninety degrees from the other planets — its pole pointed directly towards the Sun.

`Well, Cressida darts around the trans-light beam making tiny

adjustments to the tachyon envelope, making sure that everyone in the

federation gets enough makeover shows and reality TV to keep them

happy. No more missing I'm a Chelonian... Get *me* out of *here!* or As *the Worlds*

Turn. Cressida also happens to be in the best position to witness the arrival of Maleficent.'

Ah, yes. Maleficent. The reason for their arrival in the forty-first century.

An asteroid. Another asteroid.

Ìt's more than just an asteroid, Mel,' the Doctor had argued, back

in the console room. 'It's a spectacle, an *event.* Maleficent has been on its way towards Uranus for over a century, nudged out of the Kuiper Belt by

a mysterious explosion.'

`What sort of an explosion?'

The Doctor had shrugged. 'Who knows? Whatever it was, it's sent

Maleficent on a collision course a century in the making, gently sailing

through the Solar System until its final, catastrophic impact.'

`Surely these collisions happen all the time, though?' Astrophysics had

never been her strongest suit, but she knew that the Solar System was like the M25 on a bad day.

The Doctor's excitement then went up to II. 'That's just the point, Mel.

When Maleficent crashes into Uranus, the rare metals in its core — and I

mean *rare* — will react with the methane layer in the upper atmosphere.

The display will be breathtaking, like a thousand November the Fifths all at once.' He'd grinned that infectious grin. 'Trust me!'

And Mel had. Which was why she and the Doctor were on their way to

a meandering moon.

`Meandering moon... Yes, I like that.' Prentis Duke looked up from his

script and gestured to his editor, the fragrant Jennifer-Jane Shallisay.

`Sounds rather gothic, doesn't it? To meander, to wander, to quest...'

He

glanced out of the window at the grounds of Federation News' Mars HQ.

He fully intended to spend the remaining few hours before Maleficent

collided with Uranus rehearsing his voiceover under the afternoon sun.

His greatest voiceover.

No one would forget the mellifluous tones of Prentis Duke. Not after

tonight.

Sadly, such images were swept away by the deceptively friendly voice of

his producer, a razor blade dipped in honey.

`Just learn your lines, say them, and pick up the cheque,' Ms Shallisay

oozed. 'There's no need to ham it up, Prentis.'

Prentis arched an eyebrow but bit his tongue. The delightful Ms

Shallisay had only recently joined the Federation Broadcasting

Corporation, but somehow she'd been fast-tracked into becoming his

immediate superior. Half his age, one tenth of his talent, yet she was

telling him what to do! *I'd love* to know who *she* slept with to *get* this job. It certainly hadn't been him

he didn't have anything to thaw the permafrost that

—

covered the divine Ms Shallisay! 'Your wish is my command,' he said with all the **charm he could muster. Which was far more than the meretricious**

bitch deserved.

'I know,' she said, matching his false bonhomie smile for smile. 'Oh…

I meant to tell you. We don't see you in the studio for this one.'

'I don't understand what you mean,' Prentis replied. 'I'm always in the studio. I'm the face of Federation News!' He knew that he was letting his

emotions show, but this was important. This was going to be his shining

glory, his magnum opus!

Ms Shallisay smoothed a **delicately plucked eyebrow. 'Times change,**

Prentis. This piece on Maleficent... We think it would be better from

closer up.' The dagger was drawn.

`Closer up?' *No, she* couldn't mean that, surely? And who was this *'we'?*

The dagger was inserted. 'Cressida.'

Ah. He had her. 'The last shuttle for Cressida left this morning. There's

no way I could get there in time.' He'd suspected that she'd pull a stunt

like this. And he hadn't **become the most celebrated** *news* anchor in the Federation without knowing how to do his research.

And then she twisted it. 'There's an SSS shuttle en route from Earth. It's

stopping off here to pick you up and then drop you off on Cressida. Plenty

of time.' She smiled sweetly, vicious little minx that she was. 'You'd better go and pack your tux and your toothbrush — it'll be here in an hour.'

The heart of the action, indeed! Away from his desk, his studio, his

home. **Anger sublimed into something far more satisfying.** *Revenge.*

That bitch would come to regret her high-handedness. They'd all come

to regret it. It wasn't like he had anything to lose, was it?

'What if someone notices us?' asked Mel as they followed the other

passengers — dignitaries all, according to the Doctor — through the

hexagonal boarding tube into the very heart of tiny Cressida.

`No time, no time,' said the Doctor absently, trying to avoid being

knocked over by an over-eager Martian Lord and his retinue. 'Maleficent

is due in about three hours, and they're throwing a party in the

observation hall for us — nibbles and cheap white wine, no doubt.

Everyone will be far too busy to check our paperwork.'

Òr lack of it.' Not for the first time, Mel was acutely aware that they

were about as illegally alien as you could get around these parts. She

jumped to one side as something with six arms and one alarming eye

pushed past.

'We'll just mingle. Socialise. Blend in.' He nodded towards a party of

hamster-like creatures on the far side of the cathedral-like observation

.hall, one side of which was a huge glass window staring out into space.

Pakhars

. Wonderful gossips. Well worth five minutes of your time.

Mmmm... actually, I'd allow for ten. They do go on a bit.'

Prentis clutched his stomach as the SSS shuttle dropped out of

hyperspace. It felt like every particle of his body had been shifted

a millimetre to the left. Not to the right, not back or forward, but the left.

Odd, that.

Soon after boarding the ship, they had gone to warp: the Sun, the red-

blue bulk of Mars and the stars had vanished, painted over with the misty grey void of hyperspace. Prentis hated it. If you looked too hard into it, it

'became Nietzsche's abyss, grinning back at you. Nasty.

But the view to his left made it all worth it. Uranus hung just above

them, a huge, light blue world with thin, almost imperceptible rings.

Unlike the rings of the other gas giants, Uranus' rings were vertical, thin concentric circles glittering icily in the ruby light of the Hub.

Ah, the Hub. At the end of the day, the Hub was Prentis' paymaster. He

understood little of the science, but he knew that this shimmering beam

of red light, stretching from Uranus' pole towards the distant pinprick of the Sun, some two billion miles away, allowed his face to be seen on

screens from here to the frontier worlds. The greatest transmitter ever

built.

He couldn't see Cressida, but that wasn't surprising — they were

probably heading straight towards it. He unbuckled his seatbelt and

grabbed his overnight bag. There wouldn't be the time or the facilities to

change on Cressida, so the cramped little toilet on the shuttle would have

to do. If he was going to have to touch the flesh of his adoring public —

flesh, fur, scales, whatever — he would do it in style. One last time.

It took Mel nearly an hour to escape the clutches of the diminutive

Pakhars. They had turned gossip into an art form, and their drinking

abilities weren't far behind. Nursing a small white wine — from the Moon,

of all places! — she had listened to M'dak and G'fras tell her all about the sexual shenanigans of the movers and shakers of forty-first-century life.

Politicians, actors, singers... no one was safe from *the* surgical dissection of their morals from the little hamster people. And despite Mel's initial

reluctance, she found herself enamoured by their candid enthusiasm.

Salvation finally came in the form of the Doctor, who spoke to the

Pakhars in their own language, a sort of clicking growl which had them in

hysterics. While they laughed, he pulled her over to the window and

pointed.

`Maleficent,' he whispered.

There, in the distance, just beyond the furthest of Uranus' rings, a tiny

dot was visible, its movement barely noticeable due to the sheer scale of

the big blue world.

`Doctor... there's more to this than just a firework show, isn't there?' It

had been bothering Mel ever since he had first mentioned their little trip

to 40r0. In his previous incarnation, the odd sight-seeing trip had been

a frequent diversion from their derring-do. But recently... it was as if

everything had a purpose.

The Doctor touched a finger to his lower lip. 'A few billion years from

now, something wonderful will emerge from Uranus. A creature of

unimaginable wisdom and beauty without a name, without a purpose. But

it will bring a majesty to the universe that will enrich us all.'

Ànd Maleficent is responsible?'

`Who knows? But I can't take the chance of anything going wrong.' He

turned to a nearby waiter. 'Excuse me? Has Prentis Duke arrived yet?'

Prentis *hated* the SSS. The Space Security Service was nothing more than a gang of fascist bully boys and girls, all leather uniforms and jackboots,

throwing their weight around because they could. Loathsome little people.

He had hoped that they would have vanished after Mavic Chen's tragic

death, but obviously they liked the outfits too much.

Checking his reflection in the glass of the shuttle window, he

straightened his bow-tie and smoothed down his dinner suit, a final tug

on the cummerbund before taking his leave of his oh-so-delightful hosts.

And not a moment too soon. He was in danger of overdosing on the

testosterone if he stayed any longer. And that was just from the women.

`Thank you for the ride,' he said with clipped tones. The reflection of an SSS trooper had just appeared in the glass, standing behind him with an

expression of complete disdain on his face. And a monobrow. Did they

breed these people, or just find them under stones?

'Exit's straight ahead,' came the reply, equally clipped with a trace of

Chromosome deficiency. 'Get out of *here.'* So much for customer service.

Prentis made his way down the dark metal tube connecting the SSS

shuttle to Cressida, cursing that woman Shallisay every inch of the way.

He should have been in his studio on Mars, where he belonged, where

people expected him to be. Not here. But, to be honest, the location was

gloriously irrelevant. As was Jennifer-Jane Shallisay and the rest of the corrupt, back-stabbing, two-faced bunch of bottom-feeders that had

turned his glittering career into a living hell.

He had been planning this for the last ten years, ever since the new

regime had taken over Federation News. Then, five years ago, he had

finally had a good reason. But Maleficent's arrival had been the real

trigger — a spectacle that would be seen across the Federation, from Earth all the way to Draconia and beyond. And he had always planned to be at

the very heart of it.

But not quite this close. Taking a deep breath, he made his way into the

dark heart of Cressida.

'Hi — I'm Mercy.' The woman was a couple of years older than Mel,

a stunningly beautiful black woman who towered over her. Her glistening

black hair was cut in a geometrically perfect flat-top which accentuated

her angular cheekbones and astoundingly blue eyes. Worryingly, she said

her name if as it should have meant something to Mel.

'I'm Mel — Melanie Bush.' Mel went to shake her hand, but got a double-

cheeked air-kiss instead.

Ìsn't this simply magnificent?' said Mercy. She turned to a small

weasel-like man hovering around her with an expression of sheer terror.

`Remember — I want to be framed against the explosion.' Then back to

Mel. 'PR people — you have to tell them everything. So — what brings you

to this little red rock?'

Mel had this all prepared. So it was rather unfortunate when

Mercy

added: 'Especially since you're not actually on the guest list.'

`Really?' Mel tried to feign surprise, but her new-found friend was

having none of it.

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`Yes, really.' Mercy gave a smile that just bordered on the condescending.

Ì checked it before I arrived. Always wise to know the opposition.' She

paused. 'You don't even know who I am, do you?'

There was only one response. The standard one. 'I'm not from around

here,' she muttered. The excuse that the Doctor had drummed into her.

But Mel wasn't sure that it was going to wash this time, especially when

àround here' encompassed thousands of star systems and trillions of

people.

Mercy grabbed her arm with what felt like real friendship, throwing Mel

into confusion. 'Excellent — a woman with a secret. So you're not going to

be a boring old fart like the rest of this crowd.' She cast an elegantly

manicured hand around the packed observation hall. 'Just look at them.

Has-beens, wannabes and nobodies, all in one place. I'm surprised that

they don't cancel each other out.' A fruity laugh. 'Now, let's get a drink

and have a natter. As I said, I'm Mercy — just so you know, I'm the biggest

film star in the Federation.'

Mel gulped. 'Pleased to meet you. I'm... I'm a nobody.'

Trends!' The Doctor surged out of the crowd and grabbed him by the

hand. 'How very good to see you again!'

`Doctor?' Prentis was momentarily stunned, which was certainly not a

common occurrence — he was renowned for being Mr Unflappable. But

the last time he'd seen the Doctor had been a decade ago, when Prentis

had been covering the election for the new Guardian of the Solar System.

Yet the Doctor looked exactly the same, as if time had stood still for him.

Lucky man. Prentis was a slave to his cosmetic surgeons and whatever the

snake-oil sellers were offering this week; but the Doctor looked identical

— not a sign of work, chemical or surgical. Perhaps he'd let Prentis in on

his secret. Before it was finally too late.

`The years have been good to you!' The Doctor lied with a newsreader's

diplomacy, taking Prentis' arm and dragging him over to the buffet table.

`Now, I want to know everything that's been happening. I'm afraid I've

been out of the loop, so to speak.'

Prentis didn't need to be asked twice to talk about himself.

The Technix watched the holographic monitor with rapt attention, just as

the bald-headed sub-humans had been bred for. Nothing more than

human calculators, with less free will than a servo-robot and the intuition

of a chair-leg.

They were tracking the curve of Maleficent as it arced through the Solar

System to its irrevocable destiny with Uranus, watching the point of light

as it approached. In less than an hour it would reach the optimum point

in the gas giant's gravitational field — and then it would be time to act.

Time to make the irrevocable revocable.

Àlmost time?' Branko Chen knew that calmness and control were

always paramount — his grandfather had drummed that lesson into him

since childhood — but the anticipation was almost heady. In less than an

hour, the Solar System would have a new Guardian — its rightful Guardian

— and all this shadow-boxing and eminence gris business could finally

come to an end. The mouthpiece on Earth could be dethroned, and he, the

rightful heir to the Solar System, could embrace his destiny.

Technix 674 nodded. 'Maleficent will reach Uranus' primary Lagrange

Point in just under an hour. Its velocity will slow sufficiently for the impact to change its course as predicted.'

Perfect. The entire Federation was waiting for a pyrotechnic

spectacular. But his machinations would give them much, much more.

Branko Chen would give them a new god.

He took a deep breath. 'Contact our field agents. Make sure that they're

ready.'

Prentis held up his hand in mock self-depreciation. 'But I've been

gabbling on for an age and a day, Doctor. What about you? Where have

you been for the last decade?'

'Oh, you know... here and there. Mainly there.' A raised eyebrow,

a shrug. The evasion was obvious, but Prentis chose not to press the

point. It had been clear from their first meeting that he was a man of

mystery, probably an agent for one of the many counter-SSS groups set up

during the final days of Mavic Chen's reign. And such contacts were to be

cultivated, not frightened off.

'As you can see, nothing much has changed,' said Prentis.

'What about your new Guardian? Working out all right?'

The Doctor said 'new' as if the coronation had been only yesterday

rather than ten years ago. But Prentis replied regardless. 'Same old, same

old, Doctor. New policies, old attitudes. The Solar System is still as

isolated from the Federation as it was under Chen.' He sipped his drink.

'Did you know that Mavic Chen had a grandson? Branko Chen. It was

always intended that he would succeed, but Mavic Chen's death made that

rather difficult. Lots of dirty laundry being aired, all manner of rumours...

I think old Mavic wanted a dynasty.'

The Doctor gave a sad smile. 'I once said that every oligarchy gets the leadership it deserves, and my experiences since have done nothing to dissuade me of the truth of that. When mankind is ready for a change, it

will get that change.' He patted Prentis on the shoulder and he forced himself not to flinch at physical contact. 'Meanwhile, stand back and enjoy the spectacle.'

Prentis laughed. He knew that there was no hope, no end to all of this. The misery of the Outer Planets, the rebellions on the Frontier Worlds. The ever-present threat from Galaxy Five, despite the peace treaty... What was the bloody point of it all?

Unless someone changed it, challenged the status quo and made people wake up to the danger that their indolence and lassitude would rain down upon them...

Òf course, Doctor. That is what we're ***here*** for.' Prentis suddenly looked at his watch. 'Although I'd better check that the robot cameramen

are in place. I wouldn't want my adoring public to miss a second of this!'

`Go on, try one of these.' Mercy held out a plate of small starfish-like creatures — deep-fried, by the look of it — towards Mel. 'I know the caterers. Not the best, but definitely on the good side of adequate.'

Ì' m a vegetarian,' she protested.

`Not a problem. They're vegetables.' Mercy clapped her hands together.

`Like most of the so-called guests here. My agent thought that the

Maleficent impact would make great publicity for my ***new*** film, but then that canape has more business nous than she has.'

Mel wished that Mercy hadn't said that just as she took her first bite,

delicious as it was. 'But you said you were the biggest film star in the

Federation?'

Òh, I am. But the competition isn't exactly fierce at the moment. At the

last Oscars, my 'Best Female Sentient' nomination was up against an

Arcturan Lady Macbeth and a Martian Diva.'

`Did you win?'

Mercy pouted. 'No. The judges obviously favoured a squeaky little fish

thing in a tank squealing "the multitudinous seas incarnadine" rather than "Mercy is... Dalek Killer". Still, my box office was more impressive hers. Or its. Whatever the ugly little things call themselves.'

Mel had met a few Arcturans during her travels, and had to admit that

they gave her the creeps — their voices all seemed to come from the same

hysterical voice synthesiser program, and — more disturbingly — reminded

her of her French teacher in the third year. But she'd rather have seen

Shakespeare than some shoot-em-up nonsense. However, that wasn't

exactly the politic thing to say to someone who, a, had an ego as large as

a planet and as fragile as an egg and, b, could get her clapped in irons

or

whatever the forty-first-century equivalent was.

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'Awards ceremonies are like that,' she muttered. The right people never

win.' Mel tried not to think of the cabinet of trophies that her parents had sever failed to point out to visitors to their house in Pease Pottage.

Winning had come easy to her, and somehow that made it less important,

less necessary. But to people like Mercy — and Mel had met enough of

them in her life, both on Earth and off it — it was as vital as air.

Mercy swigged back her cocktail. 'Anyway — who cares?' she lied. She

glanced out of the window. 'Maleficent will be here soon. Think of it —

millions of tons of ancient rock, hurtling into that gorgeous blue planet.

More spectacular than the Galaxy Five victory parade! Better than the two-

thousandth Academy Awards! And the most widely viewed event in history!'

Mel said nothing, but looked at the small disk of Maleficent as it

approached, now about an inch across and shining purple in Uranus'

reflected light. But it was a rock. A big rock, true... but a rock all the same.

What was the fuss all about? She managed to locate the Doctor waving

goodbye to some old man in a dinner suit. Even they both looked really

animated. Had Mel become so jaded that even a once-in-a-lifetime

celestial event was simply business as usual?

I, Mercy suddenly rose from her seat like some Roman goddess emerging

from the sea. 'Right, my dear. Time to get ready. I have to change and prepare for my shining moment.'

Mel couldn't see anything wrong with the sparkly black trouser suit

Mercy was wearing. But then again, Mel wasn't a galactic diva.

`Feel free to take full advantage of Mario here,' she said, flicking

a finger at the waiter. 'You'll find him most accommodating!' And with **that,** she was a shining black blur vanishing into the crowd. Mel glanced **at** Mario, who leered at her. She shuddered and ate another battered

starfish.

The Doctor checked his pocket-watch, squinted at Maleficent, and then **looked** at his watch again. Everything was running precisely to schedule, **exactly** to plan.

That was, until the floor started to vibrate.

dranko

Chen allowed himself a burst of emotion, punching the air with

his fist. The Technix ignored him, as they quite rightly should. The message from the field agent had been concise but accurate: 'Stage One

complete.' And now the tiny red dot of Cressida was changing course in **the** holo-display.

Heading straight for Maleficent. Very, very quickly.

* * *

The rest of the crowd was only just beginning to notice that something

was amiss when the Doctor's hand appeared on Mel's shoulder.

Ì take it this isn't part of the scheduled entertainment?' asked Mel,

putting her glass down on the table, only to see it vibrate off the edge and shatter on the floor.

No,' said the Doctor gravely. 'Someone has overridden Cressida's

impulse drive. I have to get to the engine room and find out what's going

on.'

`Why would anyone want to do that?'

Ì suggest you look out of the window.'

Mel complied. And realised that the little purple disk of Maleficent was

now the big purple disk of Maleficent. And getting bigger by the second.

`We're going to collide with Maleficent!' she cried.

Ùnless I can stop it, that's exactly what's going to happen. Cressida

won't stand a chance — the force shields around this moon will collapse

and we'll be spread over its surface like jam.'

`Then get going! Is there anything I can do?'

`Try to keep everyone calm. Pretend to be someone important — that

always works for me. Tell them that we're moving in for a closer look and

that this is all part of the Maleficent experience. Think you can do that? Of course you can do that. Best of luck!' And then he was off, scattering

guests with his umbrella. Before he stopped.

Òh — all of the base personnel have been murdered. Some kind of

poison. So we're in charge.'

Mel's eyes widened in horror. So much for the sight-seeing tour.

`Cressida is now reaching orbital intersection with Maleficent,' stated

Technix **221.**

Ìs my personal guard ready?' Ten thousand loyal SSS troopers, ready to

storm the Federation Centroplex on Io. Five thousand prepared to engage

the Guild on Oberon. 'What about the Parliament?' Key officials on Earth,

ready to overthrow the placeholder on Chen's throne and restore the

dynasty as it was meant to be.

Èverything is prepared. Three minutes until intersection.'

Branko Chen raised his eyes to the ceiling. ***Grandfather. I'm*** *going* to ***make***

you proud.

Ìsn't this wonderful!' Mel emoted. 'We're going to see the impact from

really close up!' And it was close up. You could now see the surface of

Maleficent, pock-marked and broken from its eternity in the darkest

regions of space. But the Pakhars and Martians and Arcturans and strange

16o

squiddy things in plastic bags all nodded and returned their attention to the huge purple asteroid, heedless of the imminent catastrophe.

`Having problems?' Mercy was standing behind her, clad in iridescent

red. 'I see we've changed course.'

`Something's going wrong,' Mel whispered. 'Cressida is out of

control.'

Mercy laughed. 'Isn't it just? My camera crew are all over the place.' She nodded towards the window. `So much better this close up, isn't it?'

`Did you have something to do with this?'

`Me?' Mercy held her hands in supplication. 'Why would I want to alter

the course of a moon? I'm a film star, not an astronaut!'

Mel snapped. Hours of false friendship, of trying to be nice to someone

with all the depth of a puddle... it was just too much for her. 'You lying cow! It was you, wasn't it? All that rubbish about having to change your

dress. You murdered all of the base personnel and then changed course!'

Mercy gave an evil grin. 'Think what you like, Mel. I play to win. And

now you're coming with me.' She grabbed Mel's wrist and started

dragging her away. Mel went to protest, but Mario was suddenly there as

well, the leer now a threatening smile. Was that a gun in his hand?

`Now, Melanie Bush. Time to get you out of the way.'

The door to the engine room — duralinium laced with aetemium, by the

look of it — was locked. Even the sonic screwdriver wouldn't have helped

— this was one of those clever, clever doors which bonded to the

frame,

rendering it nothing more than a solid mass of metal. But there was

a keypad... the Doctor smiled. He was good at them.

He started tapping.

`We're slowing,' said Mel, as Mercy and her attendant pulled her away

from the crowd. The vibration was rapidly lessening.

Ì sincerely hope so,' said Mercy. 'I didn't come here to end up as

roadkill. Now, be a good girl and we'll all get out ofthis okay. Cause a fuss and... well, Mario isn't quite the wet fish he appears.'

Ìntersection in five seconds.' Branko Chen watched as Cressida's hectic

rush around Uranus slowed to a crawl, until the little red dot converged

with the white dot.

Ìntersection achieved.'

The jolt knocked Mel and her captors to the floor. Glancing back at the

crowded room, she saw that most of the guests were in a similar state of

disarray, arms and legs and pseudopods flailing. Cressida had obviously

hit Maleficent, but it had hardly been the fatal collision she had expected.

And then she realised that Mercy had banged her head and was in the

land of dreams. But Mario was reaching into his jacket for something —

and you didn't need to be a genius to guess what.

Clambering to her feet, she brought a nearby water pitcher down on

Mario's head and ran out of the observation hall. Time to find the Doctor

and get some answers. To questions such as 'why aren't we all dead?' and

`what the heck is going on?'

The keypad was proving tricky. Humanity's natural paranoia and

suspicion had been raised to a high art under the rulership of Mavic Chen,

and the Doctor wasn't sure that he was up to the task — especially not with

time running out. And it was certainly running out.

It was obvious that someone had planned all of this to perfection:

Cressida had impacted Maleficent — the Doctor had only just been able to

remain standing — but it was still moving. Or rather, they were still

moving. The mysterious *someone* was using Cressida as a planetary

bulldozer, changing Maleficent's course and sending it off who knew

where... although the Doctor had a very good idea. But the whys and the

wherefores could wait. Maleficent had to impact Uranus.

He looked around for an alternative strategy.

Mel had no idea where she was going, but anywhere was better than being

with Mercy. Thankfully, the base was well signposted, and 'central

control' looked as good a place as *any*.

Throwing off her high heels, she started running down the corridor,

looking back every few moments to make sure that she wasn't being

followed. Cressida was obviously still moving, but where to? And what

was happening to Maleficent?

She was so preoccupied that she virtually collided with the old man that

the Doctor had been talking to earlier.

`Who are you?' *he* asked. 'What are you doing here?'

Mel stood her ground. 'I could ask you the same question,' she stated.

`Hey — you were talking to the Doctor earlier.'

`You're his friend?' The man looked visibly relieved. 'Belle, isn't it?'

`Mel.'

Ah, yes, Mel. Now, I'd love to stay and chat with you, but there simply

isn't time. I'm sorry about this...' He pulled out a stubby gun. 'Get inside.'

Maleficent was now heading away from Uranus, just as planned.

`Secondary intersection in ten minutes.'

The thin red line of the Hub beckoned on the holo-display.

The Doctor stood at an crossroads, weighing up his options and weighing

up the directions indicated on the walls. The life support section and

primary shield control couldn't help him, but what about 'Hub

Maintenance'? Cressida had been retro-fitted to adjust the Hub's tachyon

envelope. Surely there had to be something there he could use?

`So you're behind all of this,' said Mel. 'Hijacking Cressida for some

dark

purpose!'

The man turned round from the control panel he'd been fiddling with.

`Hijacking? My dear, dear Mel, this is as much a surprise to me as it is to

you. Indeed, it's a terrible spanner in my works, so to speak. Since you're

a friend of the Doctor's, I'm assuming that I can trust you. My name is

Prentis Duke.'

`Doesn't mean a thing to me. Then again, I'd not heard ofMercy till she

introduced herself earlier.'

Prentis stopped what he was doing and stared at her. 'Mercy? The film

star?'

`That's the one.'

`Then the Doctor obviously chose you for your skills as a medium.

Mercy's been dead for nearly a year. I wrote her obituary.'

Hub Maintenance was a poky little room with a single control panel in the

centre of the room. Clearly, the whole set-up was computer-controlled,

which made a lot of sense. Having a permanent human operator would

have been pointless: adjusting tachyon envelopes was a tricky business,

what with the particles moving faster than light and backwards in time.

However, the force field generators which adjusted that envelope could

be used to repel Maleficent, nudging the asteroid back onto its original

course. But the timing, the timing The Doctor knew the exact moment,

the exact angle and the exact velocity that Maleficent had to hit the surface of Uranus. Unless he could make Cressida duplicate all of those with its

tachyon manipulators, all of this would be pointless. But there was

another bit of business to attend to first.

Òh, no, not you.' The voice came from the open doorway. Ì'd *been*

warned that you might make an appearance, but I had hoped that my luck

would hold.'

The Doctor span round to see a tall black woman in iridescent red.

A small man in waiter's garb was wobbling nervously behind her.

The Doctor looked at her gun. 'Oh — one of you lot. What's your interest

in all of this?'

The woman entered the room. 'In three billion years —

`Yes, I know all about that. That's why I'm here.' He clasped his hands

together. 'The question is... are you here to help me... or to stop me?'

`For the last ten years, the Federation has had a cancer at its core,' said

Prentis. 'That cancer has been the Solar System. The previous Guardian,

Mavic Chen, allied himself with the galactic powers to overthrow the

Federation, but he was killed before it could happen. I'd hoped that that

meant the end of it, but his successor is nothing more than a puppet,

a caretaker, mouthing platitudes while the Earth colonies suffer in

silence.'

He had wanted to say all of this to the Doctor, but the time simply hadn't

seemed right. But Mel was the Doctor's companion — confession by proxy.

`So why divert Cressida?'

Ì told you, Mel — I didn't. This was to have been the culmination of my

career.' Prentis sat down in the only chair in the room. 'I was a successful journalist once. I found the truth and I broadcast the truth. But the truth

has been suppressed. Federation News has been taken over by agents of

the new Guardian, and everything that could possibly perturb the balance

has been buried. It's time to put the record straight. And the Maleficent

collision — broadcast across the Galaxy — would have been my chance to

set the record straight.'

`But why wait this long? Surely you could have acted sooner?'

Prentis shook his head. 'I'm too much of a coward. To save my own

skin, to preserve my reputation, I turned away from every opportunity. But

now... I'm dying, Mel.'

'Dying?'

Ì have Belier's Disease. A trans-species genetic condition that is

untreatable. My DNA is being rewritten, Mel. In a matter of days, I'll be

nothing more than a pool of amino acids on the floor. I don't have

anything to lose.'

`Then make your broadcast. Tell the galaxy. Do it, Prentis.'

Ì might need your help.'

`Just ask!'

`What do you think?' asked Mercy.

Ì think a lot of things, Merculite. It is Merculite, isn't it? I knew your

cousin. She knew the difference between right and wrong. Such a pity that

you don't.'

He was as irritating as his reputation. 'I know what orders are, Doctor.

And my orders were to stop Maleficent crashing into Uranus.

Unfortunately — or fortunately — someone did it before me. Any ideas?'

`No. And even WI did, I wouldn't help you. You should know that.'

Mercy laughed. 'Oh, I know that only too well, Doctor, as do my

superiors. There was a r7 per cent probability that you'd be here, sticking your nose in.' She waved the gun. 'Now, step away from the console, nice

and gently.'

`No.' Before Mercy could stop him, he stabbed a finger at the console.

A low rumble began to resonate throughout Cressida.

'What have you done?'

'I'm flooding the whole of Cressida with strange tachyons and charmed

anti-quarks — a little recipe I cooked up when I suspected your presence.'

`Suspected?'

'Oh, yes. You're not the only one to do their research, Merculite. Mercy

died in an accident just under a year ago. So I was rather surprised to see her so chummy with Mel. I've been prepared for you ever since.'

Mercy could feel herself getting lighter.

'My little particles are perfectly harmless to most people, but if you're only here by virtue of a time ring... well...' He waved. 'Bon voyage!'

Mercy tried to fire, but reality slipped between her fingers. Cressida

slowly faded away...

'I'm ready when you are,' said Mel.

`Mel, I've been preparing this for the last ten years. I'm ready.' Prentis stepped in front of the camera and began to speak.

'Hi, I'm Prentis Duke. And I'm here on Cressida, Uranus' meandering

moon, with a ringside seat for the greatest spectacle in history. But before that, there are just a few things I need to say...'

As he began the broadcast of his life, Mel slipped away.

'I need an update!' Branko Chen was getting restless — these coloured dots

'and lines were fine, but he wanted to know exactly what was going on.

When Maleficent hit the Hub, it would wipe out the entire galactic

communications network. And under that cover of darkness, he could

act. By the time that communications were restored, a Chen would be in

;

power. Again.

;'Doctor?' Mel had finally found him in the Hub Maintenance room. He

appeared to be watching the TV.

`Mel, come here. Prentis Duke is certainly going to shake things up

ground here.'

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Mel move closer and could see him on the screen.

deliberate famines

`...

enforced on the frontier worlds...'

Ì know,' she said sadly. `He's dying. This is his swan song.'

`Dying? Why didn't he tell me?'

Ìs that important? To you, I mean?'

Ìmportant? Of course it's important. Someone has to pilot Cressida —

and Maleficent — into Uranus. I was going to do it, but if Prentis has

nothing to lose...'

Mel was shocked. `That's a bit cold, isn't it?'

The Doctor grabbed her by the shoulders. `Mel — this is important! Now,

we have about r5 minutes. Get all of the guests into the TARDIS.'

`The TARDIS? But the TARDIS is on Io!'

Ì sent her ahead. She's sitting in storage *bay 3.* I'll meet you there in ten minutes. Now go!'

Mel had questions upon questions, but knew what she had to do. Even

if she didn't like it.

`What the hell is happening?' Messages were coming in from all over the

Federation — and beyond. The people who had put their trust in him, and

he had trusted... all of them were turning against him! All because of this

damned news broadcast! What the hell had he put Shallisay in charge for?

She was supposed to keep Duke under control, not give him free reign to

spread his... his lies!

Mavic Chen's involvement with the Da—'

`...

`Turn it off.' Branko Chen snapped his fingers. `Prepare my Spar ship.

I need to get out of here.'

Technix 444, 656 and 2r3 rose from their seats.

Ì am afraid that will not be possible,' said 444. Ùnder article 3 of

Federation law, you are under arrest.'

`But... but... you're mine. You belong to me!'

A small voice piped up from the communications console. `Not any

more, Branko — this is democracy in action. I'm afraid you've missed your

chance. And the authorities have impeached your little puppet friend back

on Earth. Never mind.., better luck next time.'

The Doctor closed the connection to Branko Chen's base. He knew that the Chen dynasty would survive, but at least he'd made a small difference.

And he knew that even the small differences added up eventually. He suddenly realised that he wasn't alone in the room.

'An, Prentis,' he said without turning round. `That was an impressive broadcast. The crowning pinnacle ofyour career, ifl might make so bold.'

`Mel`s told you, hasn't she?'

The Doctor faced him. 'I'm so very sorry. But I need to ask one last favour of you.'

Prentis smiled. And looked younger than anything that the surgery and chemicals had achieved. 'Just name it, Doctor.'

The console room was filled to bursting: aliens of all shapes, sizes and colours looking around the dimensionally transcendental interior with a palpable mixture of shock, surprise and awe.

Thankfully there was no sign of panic: Mel had managed to convince them that whatever waited for them inside the police box was far safer than staying on Cressida.

The great doors suddenly opened and the Doctor bustled in. 'Make room, make room,' he shouted, shoving an irate Guermantian out of the way. He reached Mel.

Ìs... is it sorted?' she asked quietly.

`Yes, Mel. It is. I'm sorry, but there really was no alternative.'

`He was a nice man,' she said.

Ìndeed. And what he's done today will resonate through history. Now,

let's get our little menagerie away from here. The TARDIS would survive

the impact, but I'd like to get a better view.'

Prentis Duke pressed the buttons in sequence, just as the Doctor had

instructed. Twenty-four hours ago, the idea of his impending death had

both terrified and inspired him. But now? Now he knew he'd made

a difference.

He tapped out the final sequence and sat back in the chair. The

temperature was rising now — Cressida's shields were collapsing as the

gravity of Uranus bore down on them. But he didn't care.

Prentis Duke had finally achieved what he had always wanted.

Immortality.

Cressida's singularity generators exploded seconds before Maleficent hit

the Uranian atmosphere, a prelude of actinic light before the main

performance. Then the ancient bulk of Maleficent plunged into the

methane layer, the heat of re-entry igniting the exotic materials that lay at the asteroid's core.

Purple flames blossomed around the entry point, only to be blown away

by pinks and greens and yellows which expanded in waves across the once

bland atmosphere. Ripples of colour, lighting up the planet before subsiding, only to be replaced by even more spectacular explosions.

Gouts of burning hydrogen burst from the surface in blinding lilac plumes, before plunging back into oceans of fiery methane.

The Doctor had been right. A thousand November the Fifths, all at once.

It took nearly an hour for Uranus to finally return to normal. An hour in which the TARDIS console room had been filled with oohs and aahs with each new display. The Doctor had even wired up the scanner's audio circuits to receive the variations in Uranus' magnetic field, generating bangs and whooshes and even more oohs and aahs from the assembled dignitaries.

And then it was over. The Doctor had closed the scanner and reset the coordinates for the spaceport on Ganymede, and soon Mel was acting as usher again, urging, cajoling and frequently shoving the alien glitterati through the great doors. Finally the console room was empty, and Mel leant against the doors and let out a long sigh.

`Did you notice that M'dak and G'fras didn't get to see the fireworks?' asked the Doctor over his shoulder as he dematerialised the TARDIS.

Mel frowned. She was ashamed to admit that all Pakhars looked alike.

`They weren't here? Then that means... They were on Cressida when it exploded? I should have checked. I should have made sure that —'

`They were long gone. Their escape pod left Cressida just after it

collided with Maleficent.'

Èscape pod?'

`They were the cause of the near-disaster, Mel. Not Mercy — she was an

agent for a much higher power, I'm afraid. I suspect that they were agents

in the pay of the very powers that Prentis exposed. I'm sorry.'

Mel shook her head. 'I don't like the forty-first century, Doctor. Let's get out of here.'

He grinned. 'I assure you. It gets better. A lot worse in the short term,

but eventually, a lot better.'

`Doctor... you said that something wonderful emerges from Uranus in

three billion years. Could Prentis have had anything to do with it? His body was in the mix of chemicals, remember?'

The Doctor gave one of his enigmatic smiles. 'Possibly. Quite possibly.

Now... where to next, I wonder?'

Unfinished business. The Doctor leafed through his 5Soo-oo-Year ry until

he found the right page.

Àh, yes,' he muttered. 'Maleficent.' He rose from his armchair and went

over to the console, manipulating the big brass levers like a concert

pianist. The time rotor's crystal interior rose and fell as the TARDIS

sought a single point, deep within the Kuiper Belt in the fortieth century.

Activating the holographic scanner, he looked up at the dusty wastes

of

the outer solar system. And there it was: Maleficent, gently rolling

through the void.

Ìt's been a long time since I've used the TARDIS as a cricket bat, but I'm

sure I haven't forgotten,' he muttered. Now, old girl... just a gentle

nudge...'

Three billion years in the future, the Solar System has changed beyond

recognition. The Earth has died, been reborn, and died again; Mars is

a charred cinder; Jupiter a small but brilliant star. Yet Uranus abides, still the same cerulean globe, circling a star now reaching middle age.

Out of the void, a small blue box materialises. Just in time to see the

surface of Uranus erupt as it had done an eternity ago, although this time

it is giving something back to the universe. A being of unimaginable

power, a phoenix from the ashes of its birth. It has no name, no purpose;

simply a sense of wonder.

And then it hears a voice, calling it. A voice it recognises.

`Hello, Prentis. Good to see you again.'

Neptune

Richard Dinnick

An Aduenture of the Third Doctor,

with Sarah Jane Smith

Fear.

It was almost tangible in the way it enveloped the settlement and gave

everything an air of uncertainty. Fear of attack from the skies. It gnawed

at the inhabitants like a cancer, steadily breaking down the optimism that

had once been so prevalent. Fear ofinvasion and subjugation. Fear ofWar.

At least, that was how Sigma < Tism felt and she assumed everyone else

felt the same. Certainly that was how things looked from the window of the alcazar.

Sigma ran one ofher hands along the acanthus ofthe window surround

and gazed dispassionately at the few of her kind who had dared the risk of **air** raids to visit the agora. She counted 13, including the three actuality-sculptors at the newsstand. One was busy with his laser chisel. 'Imminent

jeopardy from Vermillion bombardment' read the elegant, serif words

etched onto the stone facade. A second sculptress was adding a bas-relief

of their leader, while the third ran the sub head: 'Virtuoso Tene > Brism appeals for composure and undertakes to accelerate aerial defence

capabilities'.

`How is the epic progressing?' The voice was tinkly and light, like the

wind catching icicles.

Sigma turned and looked at the male who had just entered her bureau.

`Virtuoso, I apologise,' Sigma said, her own voice sounding less tuneful

and a great deal shakier. 'I was...' She tailed off, uncertain as to what she **should** say.

`Please, Sigma, there is no need to explain yourself. These are troubled

times. It is only natural that you should find yourself distracted from your verses.' Her employer smiled. 'Or were you searching the skies for

Inspiration?' His features performed a flurry of sympathy, giving his face

a more angled look; one not so easy on the eye.

Sigma lowered her gaze. 'You are perceptive to our people's

predicament, Virtuoso,' she replied. 'But I was simply scrutinising the

newsstand.' It was then it occurred to her that Tene knew this. She smiled

despite herself. 'Again, I apologise.'

`May I enquire what the actuality-sculptors have been inscribing since

my media briefing?'

`They describe your desire to ameliorate the aerial defences.' Sigma

paused, and then walked slowly round her scribe-easel to face the Virtuoso

more directly. 'However, they run with the rumour of a Vermillion attack.'

Tene made a snorting sound. 'Then they are better informed than we!'

`The air raid melodies have modulated many times. Every one of us has

heard them. Every one of us knows that we will actually be attacked soon.

The public information inscribers infer that we must prepare protection.'

`The media personnel are merely fulfilling their employment duties. We

must proceed with ours in the best of beliefs.' The Virtuoso's six

shoulders sagged a little. 'I am to hear petitions in the hippodrome. Will

you accompany me?'

Sigma gratefully accepted the offer and took her husband's arm. 'Have

you heard the hearsay headlines?' she asked. 'The rumour-sculptors have

been etching the excitement that aliens have been sighted in the

settlement.'

Sarah Jane Smith did not enjoy being stared at. It was fine to see your

name in lights, but she had never sought the kind of attention she was

receiving from the Siccati. She felt decidedly uncomfortable.

`Why are they staring at us like that?' she asked the man walking beside

her. He immediately came to a halt and turned to face his companion. His

face twitched a little as he frowned and ran an elegant index finger across

his chin.

Ìt should be perfectly obvious, Sarah Jane,' replied the Doctor. 'This

race appreciates art and beauty above all things.' He spread his arms out

to encompass their surroundings and added a slightly conceited smile for

good measure.

Sarah had to agree. As far as she could tell, the colony was only the size

of a small market town, but even to her untrained eye, every building

seemed to be a work of architectural excellence. Here an inverted pyramid

supported by vast, balconied pillars; there a domed structure bristling

with minarets and towers. It was almost as if someone had taken all the

great buildings of Earth and stuck them in a theme park.

`So why are they looking at you?' Sarah replied, sticking her tongue out.

The Doctor placed his hands on his hips and tried his best to look stern.

Às I once remarked to Shakespeare, "Will," I said, "what a piece ofwork is man... the beauty of the world".'

`You're not serious?' Sarah shook her head. How could she be so

gullible? 'Anyway, you misquoted.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Come on. We have the whole settlement to see.'

And he started to walk off again.

Ìs this better than Florana, then?' asked Sarah, skipping to catch up.

The Doctor had been promising to take her to Florana ever since they had

left London, but somehow the TARDIS always seemed to have other plans.

`Different,' came the reply. The Doctor was standing before a very odd-

looking statue. Sarah was uncertain if he was answering her question or

referring to the sculpture. It was smooth and round, the size of a two-

storey house with layered rings that tapered to one side at the top. Sarah

thought it looked as if someone had crossed a helter-skelter with an

enormous Mr Whippy ice cream and then cast it in bronze. 'What do you

make of this?'

`Can I have a flake with it?' she ventured.

`Look, if you're not going to take this seriously...' The tone was

admonishing, but well meaning.

Òh, come off it, Doctor. You can't seriously expect me to know what

a piece of alien art is meant to be!'

`No?' the Doctor sounded a little crestfallen.

Sarah suddenly became aware that she and the Doctor were no longer

alone in their appreciation of the monument. She turned round to see

who was behind them and jumped at the creature's proximity.

Ì am gratified to witness your interest in my composition.' The alien

smiled. Sarah took an involuntary step backwards. She had yet to see one

of the inhabitants of the colony up close and she had been totally

unprepared for what just happened.

`Your face...' she blurted out before realising how rude she was

probably about to be. She clasped her hands together in supplication.

`Sorry,' she said in her best little girl voice.

"Ah. Yes. My visage must seem odd to those whose own only has one aspect. Like that of all Siccati, my features change with my disposition, movement and the perception of the one viewing them. I doubt if your physiognomy allows you to observe the full effect.'

Ìt is a splendid visage, Mister...?'

`Pug<llism.' The Siccati took what Sarah thought sounded like a wheezy breath between the two parts of his name. 'As your guide.'

Ilism. Splendid. Yes. Capital, in fact.'

The alien bowed slightly. 'You flatter,' he murmured. 'I would be delighted if you were to address me as "Pug".'

As the Doctor introduced himself and Sarah to Pug, Sarah took a proper look at the newcomer. The Siccati were very odd creatures. They had six multi-jointed arms and moved on an ever-flowing mass of tendril-like filaments. This particular Siccati was wearing a velvet ensemble not a million miles in terms of style from the one the Doctor was sporting.

`Can you tell us what your motivation was for this magnificent masterpiece?' The Doctor smiled his most winning smile.

`Certainly. It was commissioned for the safekeeping of the new settlement from bombardment by space debris.'

Ìt's a weapon?' Sarah asked.

Ìt was created to safeguard our community from asteroid strike or

meteor collision. It had no designation or utilisation as a weapon until

recently,' Pug explained. 'It has now been appropriated as our only means

of defence against aggressors.'

Ì see,' said the Doctor. 'But who could possibly want to attack you?'

Before Pug could answer, the air was suddenly filled with the opening

bars of a desperate, melancholy piece of music. The air raid melodies!' he

breathed. 'We must reach the safety of the hippodrome.' He grabbed the

Doctor and Sarah's hands and started away from his creation at an

astonishing pace.

Around them, Siccati were scurrying down the boulevard, all heading in

the same direction. Others emerged from buildings clutching children,

pets and even possessions. Sarah marvelled at a pair of aliens who were

desperately trying to pull an ornate arrangement of pipes behind them as

they moved.

`Simpletons!' Pug screamed as the trio passed by. 'Discard your

instrument! You'll be terminated!' He shook his head. 'Please hurry!' he

implored the Doctor and Sarah, who actually did not have much say in the

matter, propelled as they were by the Siccati himself.

As they ran, Sarah snatched glances at the sky. At first, it appeared to be

the most fabulous blue; almost Mediterranean. The more she looked,

however, the more she realised that it was not the sky that was blue, but

the complete covering of cloud and indeed the blue was not solid, but

a miasma of similar hues. It was possibly the most stunning sight Sarah

had seen in her travels with the Doctor. It seemed apt that such lovers of

beauty should make their home on a world that possessed such

a magnificent sky.

The Time Lord caught her eye. 'Methane, I should imagine,' he called

over the now fading air raid melodies. 'Very similar to the cloud

formations found on Neptune and Uranus.'

Sarah just nodded. Her attention was more focused on something else

in the sky: something that looked decidedly as if it should not be there. At first it was just a black spec, but with every passing second it grew larger.

It also appeared to be trailing a stream of multicoloured sparks.

The crowd of Siccati was also growing increasingly large around them.

Pug was now shouldering his way past less well-built members of his

race, intent on reaching the hippodrome he had mentioned. 'There it is!'

he shouted, pointing at a vast, domed structure on the far side of the

square into which they had just emerged.

Everyone in the square had now noticed the strange object in the sky.

Cries of fear and desperation began to ring out as it became obvious it was

some sort of rocket. Sarah could feel the panic rising in her. There must

have been almost a thousand Siccati thronging about her and although

the hippodrome looked big enough to accommodate them all, she could

now see that the building's doors were relatively narrow, causing

a bottleneck.

They had now reached the steps that led to the doors and Siccati bodies

pressed against Sarah. Adrenalin pulsed through her being and made her

feel light-headed. Some of the aliens had fallen over in the mêlée and were

being trampled by their kin. Then Sarah caught her foot on a flailing limb

and stumbled. She screamed as she realised that she, too, would soon be

crushed.

A firm hand grabbed her arm and hoisted her back to her feet. She

looked up into the smiling face of the Doctor.

Ènjoy your trip, Sarah Jane?' he asked as they finally reached the doors.

Ì'll send you a postcard,' she replied, but the cracking of her voice

belied her jocularity.

A loud squelching sound made everyone look up. A darker hole was

appearing in the sky and it took Sarah a few seconds to realise that there

must have been some kind of force field in place around the colony.

Then it became apparent why an opening had formed. A violet laser

pierced the blue sky and neatly traversed the hole, striking the rocket with **a** rainbow explosion. The crowd cheered, but Pug was pulling the Doctor **and** Sarah inside, even as the rest of the crowd stood rooted to the ground.

The rainbow faded and Sarah saw that the rocket had been unaffected.

Ìt would have been shielded,' said the Doctor. Suddenly the doors

began to slide together. 'Nor he shouted. But it was futile. Sarah could see **no** one overseeing the doors' closure to hear his objection. Beside her **a** female Siccati screamed, her six arms outstretched to the crowd.

The Doctor darted between the ever-narrowing gap in the door, out into

the square once more.

`Doctor!' Sarah shouted.

The Time Lord ignored her. Instead, he snatched up a small Siccati boy

who was crying on the top step and, cradling him in his smoking jacket, **leapt** back through the fissure. The screaming female immediately

greeted him. She smiled through her tears and accepted her son back into

her charge.

With a smooth thud, the doors finally closed.

`That was a most heroic undertaking,' said Pug.

Before the Doctor could reply, there was a deafening explosion and the

floor beneath them skewed sickeningly to one side.

`Let us pray the stabilisers have not been destroyed.'

`Stabilisers?' asked the Doctor, grabbing a nearby buttress for support.

Àre we on some sort of ship?'

Ìt is a planetary arrangement vessel.'

`But the ground,' said Sarah. 'It's like a normal town — roads,

pavements...'

`We would never countenance living aboard any other classification of

transport,' Pug explained. 'The ship resides on the ice flows. If it weren't for the stabilisers we would sink in the freezing quagmire below.'

Ì see,' said the Doctor, rubbing his chin.

Sarah wondered if this was a joke, but then noticed the room was

beginning to right itself. 'Phew!' she said. 'That could have been a lot

worse.' She looked at the Doctor for confirmation, but he was staring at

something over her shoulder.

Ì think it was, Sarah Jane,' he said.

Sarah turned and saw that a vast screen covered a large proportion of

the hippodrome wall. On it was displayed a horrendous series of images.

The square outside was littered with dead Siccati, most of them bloated

and grey. Across the expanse of corpses was a great, metallic crater.

Smoke rose into the sky, where a jagged hole indicated the rocket's entry

point. Around the crater, sparks of electricity fizzed and spat.

`How?' whispered Sarah. 'Nerve gas?'

Ùnlikely,' replied the Doctor. 'All the rocket had to do was leave

a sizeable hole in the shield and the methane would do the rest. A most

unpleasant way to go.'

`Barbarians,' Pug spat.

The Doctor rubbed his chin. 'But then why the need for an

explosion at ground level.' He turned to Pug. 'Who ***are*** these enemies of yours?'

The floor gave another lurch, this time the opposite way, sending the

Siccati refugees stumbling across the expanse of the hippodrome floor.

Sarah snatched at the nearest solid-looking object. It was the Doctor's

blue velvet sleeve. Sarah heard the material beginning to rip and clenched

her teeth and eyes shut at the thought of what the Doctor might say.

With a roar of naked rocket power, the hippodrome righted itself once

more. The Doctor looked at the sleeve and then at Sarah.

Ì was rather fond of that jacket,' he managed finally. Sarah apologised

but a fanfare drowned *her* words. In front of them, the crowd was parting like the Red Sea and a group of Siccati were approaching through the

corridor of their subjects.

Most of the Siccati were dressed extravagantly, but this group were

sporting clothes that Sarah thought looked like the product of a child's

illicit activity with a pair of scissors and a copy of Vogue. A couple of the entourage had obviously eschewed clothing completely and merely wore

psychedelic patterns of body paint.

But it was the Siccati leading the group that really stood out. The most

outrageous epaulettes — four gold and two metallic green — sprouted from

his shoulders and the accompanying tassels of beaded thread hung to his

waist. His torso was covered by an array of styles that Sarah found truly mind-boggling. Indeed, in her rather plain green trouser suit, Sarah felt almost naked by comparison.

`Pug>llism!' roared the foremost Siccati. The Doctor's eyebrows shot

up in surprise then knitted together. 'Explain to me what just occurred!

Your weapon singularly failed to accomplish its task. We are defenceless!'

Ì am mortified that is the situation, Virtuoso,' Pug bowed.

Ìt wasn't his fault.' Sarah stepped between the newcomer and the

creature that had saved both her and the Doctor's lives. 'You know that

"weapon" was only mean to... to destroy asteroids,' she said. 'Not, um...'

Ènemy missiles equipped with shields,' the Doctor completed. He

placed a hand on Sarah's shoulder and gently moved her aside. 'Please

forgive my friend's outburst. She means no disrespect. How do you do?'

Àre these extravehicular individuals acquaintances of yours?'

demanded the Virtuoso.

`They are,' replied Pug. 'May I introduce Thedoct>Orism and

Sarahja < Nesmithism.' Pug then made a second bow to the newcomer.

'This is our Sett Leader, Virtuoso Tene > Brism.'

`Delighted to meet you, Virtuoso.' The Doctor clicked his heels together

and smiled his best diplomatic smile. 'I *see* you may be having problems with your ship's stabilisers. Can I be of assistance?'

`Felicitations,' Tene said. Sarah thought she detected the creature's

three-dimensional expression soften a little. 'Are you a follower of the

scientific disciplines?'

`Miss Smith, ah, that is "Sarahja", is a scribe.' The Doctor waved an elegant hand in the direction of his companion. 'This may explain the

spontaneity of her emotion.' He smiled beatifically at Sarah. 'As for me, well, it's been a while since I had any practical *experience* of spaceship engine repair and maintenance, but I'm sure my theory is still valid!'

Sarah wondered if it was just her, or whether the Doctor was actually

beginning to sound as long-winded and bombastic as the Siccati. Perhaps

he was doing it on purpose to put them at ease. She couldn't help

marvelling at the Time Lord — and not for the first time.

Ì must proffer my apologies that you find our community in such disarray,' Tene said. 'Perhaps, Pug, Thedoct can assist you in the necessary improvements to the amplified luminous radiation emitter? We would be most grateful for your help, Thedoct.'

Ì may also be able to help you renovate your stabilisers,' the Doctor said. 'And perhaps look at repairing your shields?'

Ìndeed, Thedoct, any provision of practical service would be most appreciated.'

it

`That's settled then,' the Doctor smiled at Sarah and turned to their former guide. 'Lay on, McPug.'

Sarah grimaced.

`That should do it!' The Doctor's voice sounded distorted over the communicator. Like Sarah and the small group of scientists who were watching from the base of the beautifully designed laser cannon, he was wearing a respirator that had a built-in radio transceiver.

Unlike Sarah and the scientific team, the Doctor was perched atop the bronze structure, elbow deep in Siccati wiring and circuit boards. Sarah could see strands of his vanilla hair that had escaped the respirator's straps dancing in the high winds.

`Thedoct certainly projects a magnificent persona,' said Pug.

`Yes,' said Sarah knowingly. 'Annoying isn't it?' She waited for the inevitable response.

Ì can hear every word!' came the Doctor's response.

Ì know!' Sarah said in a low, mocking tone.

Ì rather thought you might.' There followed a brief pebble washing of static. 'Pug, I have inverted the polarization of the baryon particle effusion. Those missiles' shielding shouldn't be able to deal with that. Coupled with a considerable increase in its potency, your defences will

now be much more effective!'

Sarah smiled. What gobbledegook! Still, the scientists around her all seemed to be nodding wisely.

Òur appreciation, Thedoct,' Pug called over the methane winds.

Àre you coming down now?' asked Sarah.

`

Much as I like the view, I think we should move on to the shields and the stabilisers now, don't you?' She could almost hear his smile and couldn't help grinning in return.

As she waited for the Doctor to join her at ground level, Sarah had

another opportunity to take in the destruction caused by the first missile.

It transpired that only the hippodrome had its own shields so the Siccati

caught in any of the other buildings had also died as the poisonous

atmosphere had flooded in to replace the breathable air. There were

corpses everywhere.

The Siccati equivalent of the emergency services, such as they were, had

made a valiant effort to remove the bodies, but it was a mammoth

undertaking and one Sarah felt sure would take days. Even now

a removals team was busy at the end of the boulevard, gently encasing the bodies in what Pug had told her were Siccati funerary vessels —

collapsible, open coffins decorated with tapestries and bas-relief.

Sarah bit her lip as she saw the piped musical instrument they had

passed on their way to the hippodrome. She wondered if its owners had

survived, but concluded it was unlikely. It was strange how even in alien

cultures people sometimes risked everything just to safeguard their

material possessions.

`Penny for your thoughts, Sarah Jane.' The Doctor had arrived beside

her.

Sarah shook her head. 'Nothing really, Doctor.' She tried a smile, but

ended up biting her lip. She almost lost control but then anger rose within

her. 'Right then!' she said aggressively. 'Let's just get out ofhere before we wind up dead like those poor souls...'

The Doctor placed a placatory arm around her shoulders. 'Steady,' he

said. 'We're trying to help these people, remember?'

Ì know. I'm sorry.'

Às you say, let's move on.'

They climbed into the sleek hover transport and sat facing each other

across the aisle.

`Did you want to recover your vessel, Thedoct?' asked Pug, leaning over

the passenger seat.

`Yes. That would be wonderful, Pug.' His tone did not sound wonderful,

however, and Sarah suspected that he disliked what was going on as much

as she did.

The hover transport had taken them to where the TARDIS had landed and

the Siccati had quickly loaded the time machine aboard their vehicle.

From there it had been a relatively short trip to the vicinity of the crater.

While the TARDIS was being manhandled out of the back of the

transport, Sarah took the opportunity to peer over the edge and examine

the damage.

The missile had destroyed an area of the settlement broadly the size of

a football stadium. The explosion had ripped into the bowels of the ship,

about four storeys deep. Several teams of what Sarah assumed to be

Siccati engineers were clearing large chunks of rubble, masonry and glass

r

from the sub-level floors. They operated elegant lifting and digging

machines that buzzed around the crater from one damaged area to

another, taking the debris to a large container that had been set up on the

crater's rim.

Deeper into the crater she could see that a viscous stream of grey-blue

ice had seeped through the shields. Yet more Siccati were desperately

pumping the frozen liquid out of their ship. It reminded Sarah of a World

War II submarine film

The Doctor called to her and she turned to see that he was standing in

a large, metallic lift that had appeared from the street itself. Beside him

stood the TARDIS, which was being examined by Pug and the other

scientists as if it were a sculpture of some sort. Sarah trotted over and

joined the group.

`Going down,' the Doctor said, still trying to lift the mood. The lift

started to descend.

`Why didn't we just use the TARDIS?' she whispered earnestly.

Ì thought it was too much of a risk. The old girl can be a bit temperamental, **not to** say skittish, when it comes to small hops...'

`No kidding,' Sarah said.

The lift came to a halt and rotated to reveal the stabiliser chamber.

`You may remove your respirators should you wish to do so,' Pug said. The crater has been encased in a new shield so we will be safeguarded against the methane.'

Pug gave a description of the stabilisers and their workings as well as a brief situation report. The main power lines had been severed and it would take several hours for them to be repaired. In the meantime the stabilisers had been running on internal emergency batteries, which were

now dangerously close to empty. The Doctor said he would run some conduits from the TARDIS.

`That way we can recharge the batteries without the need to use them at

the same time,' he concluded. 'So I will need the power input ports on the

stabilisers made ready.' He smiled.

The Siccati scientists and engineers nodded sagely and broke up into teams.

The Doctor disappeared into the TARDIS and Sarah followed. 'Anything

I can do?' she asked.

Although he was already under the console, he pointed a finger at the scanner 'I think we have a visitor, Sarah Jane. Perhaps you could keep her

busy while we get on with things. Ow!' He snatched his other hand away from the panel he had been fiddling with and sucked his finger.

`Mi mink me's mun mof mer me my mees,' he mumbled, finger still ensconced in his mouth.

`You think she's one of the VIPs?' Sarah clarified. She looked at the scanner again. The newly arrived Siccati was elegantly dressed, but unusually all her clothes and jewellery were black.

`Yes.' The Doctor was now back on his feet, reeling out a thick yellow cable. 'She was with the group at the hippodrome.'

Òkay,' said Sarah. 'You be careful, though. I don't want you electrocuting yourself.'

`Your faith in my abilities is flattering, Sarah Jane.'

`Poo to you, then,' she said and flounced out of the control room and back to the stabiliser chamber.

The visiting dignitary was hovering uncomfortably around the scientists, every now and again tapping on what looked like a toy piano keyboard.

Sarah walked over, adopting her best journalist's smile.

`Hello, I'm...' she tried to remember what the Siccati called her,

couldn't and plumped for, 'Sarah.'

`Greetings. I am Sigma<Tism, Grand Versifier to the Virtuoso.' Sigma

bowed very slightly.

Sarah bobbed her head in return. 'Grand Versi...? Oh! You're a poet?'

she asked.

`Yes. My comprehension is that you are a correspondent.'

`Well, I wouldn't go that far. I'm a journalist.'

Àhh. An actuality transcriber.'

Sarah just smiled. This conversation could go on in much the same vein

for some time. She needed to change tack and, as in all social situations

when she was faced with someone potentially a bit boring, she went into

ìnterview mode'. It always put people at ease. Sarah found that humans

liked talking about themselves and if she appeared interested it also helped ingratiate her to them. Sarah just hoped it worked with the Siccati, too.

`That must be a very interesting job,' she said. 'How do you produce

your work?'

Sigma smiled and showed Sarah the toy piano. It was foolscap in size

and shape, but as thick as a telephone directory. 'I can elicit all seven

senses with this scribe-tablet,' the Siccati confided. 'It also permits entire emotional and expressive reaction to events and effects.'

Sarah found herself interested despite Sigma's unique way with words.

`How can it record your emotions?'

Ìt cans the palm of the person holding it and notes the almost

imperceptible changes in tone, sweat, temperature and so forth. I am no

scientist, so I apologise for my rudimentary explanation.' Sigma handed

the instrument to Sarah. 'Perhaps if you were to appraise it yourself...?'

Sarah accepted the device and Sigma was about to show her how to

operate it when the air raid melodies started playing once more. Panic

gripped Sarah and her eyes met those of the Siccati in front of her. Despite the extra-dimensional features, it was surprising how her panic was

reflected in the face of the alien.

`Stay calm,' the Doctor said, appearing beside them. 'Perhaps we

should retreat to the TARDIS. I have tuned in to one of the news

broadcasts, so we can see if it's a false alarm or...' He trailed off. 'Quickly now!' he called to the Siccati teams working on the

stabilisers.

They all trooped into the time ship and stood watching the scanner. The

screen showed a panning shot of the hippodrome, still full of Siccati.

Sarah was relieved to see that no one other than essential personnel had

ventured outside.

In one corner of the picture was a toxout' containing a bar chart

III

depicting emotions. Fear was high, but so was love. Sarah guessed the

Siccati news camera must have been equipped with something similar to

1

Sigma's writing tablet.

Suddenly there was a 'wipe' from the hippodrome to the sky above the

I , II

settlement. Sarah recognised the black dot with its trademark tail of

rainbow sparks. It wasn't a false alarm. She bit her lip and sought out the

Doctor's hand.

`Curse the great tapestry!' spat Pug.

`Don't worry,' said the Doctor. This time his voice was deep and

confident. As if one cue, the violet laser of the aerial defence battery arced into the sky. Once again it caught the rocket head on, but this time the

rainbow explosion was brief and followed by a much larger, more

conventionally coloured one. It dissipated, leaving the azure sky empty of

any threat.

The Siccati in the TARDIS cheered and danced round the Time Lord. On

the scanner it showed similar scenes of joy in the hippodrome. Fear was

still present on the bar chart, but it had been greatly diminished.

`Congratulations, Thedoct!' Pug roared. 'Vermin will have to think

twice before attacking us with a missile again!'

The Doctor, however, was examining the controls. His features grew

darker. 'I have tracked the trajectory of the rocket back to its origin,' he said.

`So why the scowl?' asked Sarah. 'You just saved hundreds of lives!'

`This "Vermill" is actually a planet in your system; one that will one day **be** called Sedna.'

Sarah looked nonplussed.

`The planet we are currently on might also be better known to you as

Neptune.' The Doctor ran a finger across his lips.

Sarah couldn't contain her surprise. `So this is Neptune,' she breathed.

She had never been to another planet in the Solar System before.

Pug's face twisted to show all six eyes. 'We call it Cerulean,' he clarified, slightly wounded.

Then something occurred to her. `Sedna?' she frowned. 'Look, I may be

just an "actuality transcriber", but I do know how many planets there are.'

`Put it this way: everyone thought there were only six planets until Sir

William Herschel discovered Uranus in 178r. And that remained the case

until r846 when Johann Galle discovered the planet upon which this ship

now stands — Neptune. Again, everyone believed there were only eight planets for almost a hundred years, until...'

'I get the point, Doctor,' Sarah said. `So tell me about Sedna!'

Ìt will be discovered by man in 2003.'

`No doubt with some help from woman,' Sarah replied archly.

`My apologies. "Humans" ' The Doctor shook his head. 'What's

interesting is that due to Pluto's erratic orbit of the sun, Sedna and

Neptune become concurrent only once in a lifetime.'

`Yours or mine? ' Sarah grinned.

'Mine, actually.'

`That's all very interesting Doctor, but how does it help us?'

The Doctor looked genuinely hurt, but his words contradicted his

expression. 'It always helps to have the facts at one's disposal,' he said.

'**I** would have thought as an "actuality transcriber" you would know that!'

He smiled.

Sarah blew out her cheeks in mock frustration.

`Well, if you'll excuse me,' the Doctor continued. 'We have a very

difficult power conversion to work out and I'm afraid the Siccati may get

it all wrong without me.'

Sarah frowned as the Doctor left her standing alone in the

TARDIS. It was then that she realised she still had Sigma's scribe-tablet.

Cautiously, she switched on the device and the screen above the keys came

to life; a creamy, papyrus-like background with what must have been

Sigma's poetry displayed in a stylish black font. No hot metal here!

Although she was tempted to see what prose she could produce using

the scribe-tablet, she was more interested in a list of tabs that lined the right-hand side of the *screen.* As there seemed to be no other way of 183

activating them, Sarah touched the one marked 'historical'. Immediately

the screen changed to show a plethora of yet more tabs, each one ascribed

a period or general subject heading.

She was about to read the section marked 'Great Tapestry' when, on the

periphery of her vision, she noticed a small red light flashing on the

console. She put the scribe-tablet on a nearby chest and had a closer look

at it. As she did so another bulb — this time a white one — started to strobe.

`Doctor,' she called. 'I think we have a problem here!

Tene>Brism was seated at a triangular table in the hippodrome's

council

chamber. He was alone. So much time had been spent alone since the

conflict began. Too much time, in fact. Time for doubts. He sighed. Had

he done the right thing? He must have done. His people had been so

happy here. But now a considerable number of his people were dead. They

had literally died for their art. He would not let their sacrifice be for

nothing He would not capitulate to the Vermillion aggressors and now

that Thedoct > Orism had improved their defences nothing short of a full-

scale invasion would stop his community from rebuilding their

settlement.

Tene's thoughts were cut short by the entrance of his private secretary.

`Virtuoso, Virtuoso!' he babbled excitedly. 'It is the Arrangers! They

wish to communicate with you!'

`So. They know their missiles can no longer harm us.' Tene's voice

dripped with hatred. Hatred? From an artist such as he? The Virtuoso

shook his head. War is truly terrible,' he said finally 'Inform their

"Originalities" that I agree to communicate with them and will do so in half a micro-fellery.'

The private secretary just stood there.

`Wherefore do you tally?' Tene asked. He knew he had acquired

a certain hardness during the short-lived conflict, but now, if there were

to be negotiations, he would adopt a softer approach. 'Also, ensure that

the Arrangers are afforded every courtesy.'

With the stabilisers re-energised, Siccati engineers were reeling the

power conduits back into the TARDIS and arranging them in neat circles,

like a display of hoses at a garden centre. The Doctor just stood before the console, oblivious to the Siccati's presence. His mouth was drawn back in

a way that made his eyes disappear into wrinkles. Perhaps he was half

Siccati, Sarah reflected.

Òfall the confounded encumbrances, why this?' He rubbed the back of

his neck.

`What is it?' Sarah asked.

À Time Ram.' He held up his hand to stop the question already forming

on Sarah's lips. 'It's when two TARDISes occupy the same time and space.

À crash?'

Ìn laymen's terms, more of a head-on collision.'

`So what does it mean? Is the TARDIS going to be destroyed?'

Ìt means that we have little option but to leave, Sarah Jane.'

`Leave?' Sarah's tone caused the Doctor to wince. 'But we can't! We've

got to help these people, ***remember?'***

Ì know what I said.' The Doctor stood back, lines of consternation on

his forehead. 'But I cannot fathom these readings. It's almost as if the

other TARDIS is an echo of the old girl herself.'

Sarah let out a frustrated groan and turned to storm out of the

TARDIS.

She managed one pace when she collided with Sigma.

`Sarahja!' she cried. `Thedoct! You must come quickly. The Arrangers

are prosecuting for peace!'

`That's wonderful!' Sarah laughed.

Àrrangers? How did this happen?' asked the Doctor, one eye still on the

console.

`The Virtuoso is vehement that your valiant improvement to the aerial

defence caused the capitulation.'

`That is good news, indeed.' The Doctor clasped Sigma's middle hand.

`Well done. I could not be more pleased.'

`There is one supplementary stipulation the Arrangers support.' Sigma

caste down her gaze. 'You have undertaken unprecedented acts of heroism and helpfulness on our behalf. It might seem we do not

appreciate the aforementioned aid if we were to ask one additional

assignment ofyou.'

`Please, Thedoct, before you answer... The Arrangers also have

strangers on their world and one of them will be chosen as an

independent, impartial intermediary. You and Sarahja are the only two

visitors on this vessel. If we cannot supply such, I fear a Vermilion **invasion.'**

Sarah looked at the Doctor. He couldn't refuse now. He had to help. He

just had to.

Ì'm sorry, Sigma, but I can't. I have to leave. I believe we could be in

great danger ifwe remain.' The Doctor stood to his full height and placed **his** hands on his hips. His decision was obviously final.

`Well, maybe you can't, but I can,' said Sarah defiantly.

`No, I cannot allow that.'

`No?' shouted Sarah. 'Who are you to say "no"?'

Ì have brought you millions of years and hundreds of millions of miles from your home,' said the Doctor in hushed tones. 'That puts an enormous responsibility on my shoulders. You must see that. And if I am right about this Time Ram, your remaining here might even pollute the timelines.'

`Please, Sarahja,' Sigma pleaded.

`Can't you just move the TARDIS?' asked Sarah.

Ùntil a few minutes ago, that might have been an option.'

Ànd now?'

`Now I am not sure that would work.' The Doctor turned to Sigma. 'I am sorry, but I must ask you to go.'

Sarah could scarcely believe her ears. This was not the Doctor she knew and trusted. How could he just up and leave the Siccati just when things were looking hopeful for them? She shook her head, realising she had little choice but to go with the Doctor. But she wouldn't forget this. She decided then and there to leave the Doctor as soon as they returned to

Earth.

`Farewell, then, Thedoct,' Sigma said sadly. 'I am certain we will cope with the conundrum.' She sounded anything but certain.

Sarah's heart went out to her. 'I am so sorry, Sigma,' she said, fighting back the tears.

`Goodbye, Sarahja.' The two writers embraced briefly and then Sigma was gone.

The Doctor operated a control on the console and the twin doors to the outside world closed with a high-pitched buzzing sound.

To Sarah, nothing had ever sounded more like a death knell. Suddenly, she darted in front of the Time Lord and stared him straight in the face.

`Please, Doctor,' she said. 'You must be able to think of something to get round this Time Ram.'

`Do you really think I would be leaving if I could? It's impossible, Sarah Jane. I believe the other TARDIS is actually tracking this one. The pilot must be trying to arrive exactly where this TARDIS now stands. He must be desperate. It's a very dangerous manoeuvre.'

`Why would another Time Lord be desperate to land exactly where we are now?'

Ì have my suspicions.' He started flicking switches, preparing for departure.

Sarah pulled a face. **Why would the Doctor leave if he knew another**

Time Lord was en route for the Siccati ship? Unless...

`You said earlier that the other TARDIS is an echo of this one?'

For a second there was only the background hum of the TARDIS as the

time rotor started to rise and fall. Then the Doctor looked at her and

a broad smile spread across his face. 'Yes, I did, didn't I?'

Sarah was angry and relived at the same time. She couldn't bring herself

to smile, but at least he was still *her* Doctor.

Sigma stood in the Stabiliser chamber and watched as the rather

unpleasing blue box disappeared from view. She could not understand

why Thedoct had had to leave, but it was his prerogative. Certainly, his

part in her epic poem would be greatly reduced. She had been considering

making his role second only to that of the Virtuoso but now... Then she

realised that she had not even retrieved her scribe-tablet from Sarahja.

Pug joined her as the last vestiges of blue vanished from even the

Siccati's perception. 'Strange that Thedoct never expressed his farewells,'

he commented. 'I am considerably taken aback.'

`What are we to do?' wailed Sigma.

The sound that had been most cacophonous to her ears finally faded

and there remained no evidence that the TARDIS had *ever* stood there.

Then, almost imperceptibly, the sound began to return. Slowly, the blue

box was re-forming itself before their 12 eyes.

Sigma turned to Pug. 'Perhaps he veered from valediction because he

purposefully proposed to postpone it?'

The box was now solid. The right-hand door swung back and a tall,

gangly human appeared in the opening. He was wearing a coat that was

much too big for him, but seemed somehow familiar to Sigma. She was

amazed. In his hands he clutched a scribe-table; her scribe tablet.

`Golly,' he said, his face reddening. 'Is this yours?'

Pluto

Dale Smith

An *Adventure of the Second Doctor,*

with Ben Jackson and Polly Wright

The rain hammered down. That was the first problem.

The air was thick with a jungle heat, and the pounding rain didn't even

begin to lift it. The ground bubbled slightly as the rain hit it, unknown

gases released by the heat. He could taste them in the back of his throat,

raw like brimstone. The Doctor — if he was the Doctor — was pacing ahead of them, his head and shoulders hidden beneath a large black umbrella.

Polly was huddled under it with him, having to crouch because the Doctor

was a lot shorter than he'd used to be. Ben had declined the offer to

crouch under with them: he'd weathered worse storms than this. That

wasn't the problem.

The problem was that the ambient temperature should be about thirty

degrees above the temperature at which oxygen would turn into a liquid,

according to the Doctor.

If he was the Doctor.

It was dark, too. Dark like the middle of the Atlantic on the cloudiest

night, and with the same sound of water on water as the rain fell. The

Doctor had a torch that gave out much more light than it should: it cast a

dull glow about them, making this strange new world cold and grey. Ben

could only see about a yard in front of his feet before the light died. The

Doctor told him not to worry: it was only dark because the Sun was nearly

four-thousand-million miles away. Their Sun. They stumbled through the

darkness on a planet that no one on Earth even knew existed, huddled

close to Pluto as Polly huddled under the Doctor's umbrella.

Àh,' the Doctor had said. 'Yes. It's probably best if you don't mention

this when you get home. Not for a few years, anyway.'

Polly screamed.

He was dead. She knew that before she even got close, when he was just

a vague shadow that fell suddenly into the lamplight. Before that,

probably: back when they'd stepped out of the safety of the TARDIS and

into this impossible rain, she must have known that there would be a dead

man out there, in the dark, somewhere. Just as she must have known it

would be her that found him.

God was punishing her, obviously, for having no greater desire in her

life than making it to Friday night and dancing herself to a standstill at the Inferno.

If I make it home, she told herself, I'll dedicate my life to orphan

children and sick kittens and, oh, bringing about world peace or something

I promise! If I can just make it home. Please.

Ben had stepped up and put his arm around her even before the Doctor

had stooped down to examine the body. Her sailor boy, trying to protect

her. She pushed him away a little, so that his arm dropped self-consciously.

The Doctor looked up at them grimly.

`He's dead,' the little man said.

Polly shivered. Even though she had known, must have.

Àll right, Doc,' Ben said. He sounded so sure, so calm. Polly's heart was

still pounding. 'So what did for him this time?'

`Don't say that,' Polly said, turning her head.

`Don't say what?'

She didn't want to say.

`Duchess?'

She couldn't tell him how much the words 'this time' cut into her.

Reminded her that this was what her life was now. Counting the moments

between dead bodies.

`Polly?' the Doctor said softly. 'Why don't you keep the rain off him

while I try to see what happened here?'

He looked at her with those doleful eyes. With that old compassion,

that paternal concern. Familiar, even though the eyes that had been cold

ice blue were now soft chestnut brown. She'd never doubted him, not

really: of course he was the Doctor, for all that he obviously wasn't. He

still made her feel the same: reminded her what she was doing here. The

most eminent astronomers of her time would tell her the planet she was

standing on didn't exist, and the Doctor made her realise why she

deserved the chance to know better.

She didn't know why this man had died, but she could help the man

who would find out.

The Doctor smiled, and Polly thought of her grandfather.

Ben stood back and glowered, quietly. The Doctor would never have

exposed Polly to this, that much he knew. She shouldn't have to face this,

shouldn't be made to hover so definitely over the grave like this. Couldn't

he tell how she was shaking, this impostor, this not-the-Doctor? Of

course she wouldn't go back to the TA MS, not like she should — even if

she really wanted to, these modern girls wouldn't let on — but he could at

least spare her the grisly details.

The body looked fresh to Ben, although he laid no claim to being an

expert. He'd been lucky — he'd only seen a few dead bodies in his life:

a rating swept to sea in an instant; a stowaway who'd succumbed to 'flu long before they'd found him; a steadily growing list of poor buggers that

seemed practically to fall down dead in the Doctor's wake. Not that he was

convinced this was the Doctor, no matter what had happened with those

Dalek things. The way he pawed and worried the corpse, scratching at it

like a scavenger, doing everything but taste it.

Òh, dear,' said the not-Doctor. 'Oh, dear me.'

Ben looked up.

`Stone me!' he cried.

And then the world erupted into flame.

The fire ship fell through the lack of atmosphere in perfect silence,

slowing, slowing, and finally shaking the earth with its descent.

Polly looked to the Doctor.

He stood and straightened his bow-tie.

`Well,' he said to himself.

Ben carefully positioned himself between Polly and the rocket, and

despite her annoyance, she let him. But she wouldn't let him feel superior.

She ignored him, calling across to the Doctor.

`Did you see that, Doctor?' she called.

The Doctor gave no indication of hearing.

`The way the light's reflecting? We're in some kind of dome, aren't we?'

A panel in the rocket's side let out four plumes of smoke and then fell

away silently. A series of stairs started to unfold from the resulting gap,

throwing up sparks of ice as they pounded into the solid ground. There

was a pause then, as if the rocket wanted maximum dramatic impact.

Polly did her best to not feel nervous.

`Yes, Polly,' the Doctor answered, not taking his eyes from the rocket.

Ì think that explains the atmosphere and the temperature. I suspect our friend here was a terraformer, an advance party to make sure that these

people had somewhere to land.'

`Then they're not going to be too pleased when they find out he's dead,'

Ben snipped. 'Are they?'

Polly didn't say anything.

The rocket's airlock slid open.

`Ben!' Polly gasped.

When she was afraid, she still turned to him.

Ì'm here, Duchess,' he said with as much bravado as he could manage.

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The shadows were moving inside the airlock: whatever was inside was

starting to come out. And although the corpse at their feet was as human

as they were, the shapes looming in the darkness seemed anything but.

Ben could just make out something the height of a man but the width of

the TARDIS jerking forwards, but it wasn't easy: the rocket had switched

on blinding floodlights, throwing everything into shadow and silhouette.

Only the Doctor kept staring into the rocket, and if he saw anything he

was keeping it to himself.

The lumbering shadow moved forwards, towards the edge of the dome.

Behind it were two smaller shapes, dragging something behind them.

`What is it?' Polly gasped.

Ì don't know,' the Doctor said. 'Some kind of robot possibly.'

Ben tried to look, and he had to admit that the shape did resemble the

robots he'd seen at the pictures: chunky metal body with a glass dome

head. He squinted, shielding his eyes with his hand. The figures behind it

seemed dwarfed by it, although he guessed they must be normal size.

Àt least it's out there and we're in here,' he said confidently.

The robot reached out with an appendage, and the dome shimmered for

a few moments. Just long enough for the robot and its companions to

move through the protective dome as if it was suddenly water. Where

robot and dome met, a cold blue light burned. It briefly lit the inside of the robot's glass head, and Ben was sure he saw something in there that

wasn't valves and transistors.

`Stand back, Ben,' the Doctor warned, as the robot entered their

atmosphere. Ben stood his ground.

He could see tiny particles of liquid boiling on the robot's metal hide,

vaporising into the stale air.

WHO **ARE YOU?** the robot boomed. It lifted an arm, the hand pointing

at them accusingly. Like a weapon, Ben thought. **WHAT ARE YOU DOING**

HERE?

One of the figures stepped out from behind the robot and removed its

helmet. She was a young woman with purple eyes and long auburn hair.

She looked at the three of them with a haunted look on her face: she was

expecting the worst, Ben knew.

`Where's Scrivens?' she asked. 'What have you done with him?'

`We haven't done anything!' Ben shouted.

The Doctor stepped to one side, letting the newcomers see the body on

the ground. There was a moment of silence.

Ben tensed, ready to attack.

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A

`They killed him, '

The second figure had taken his helmet off, revealing himself to be

a wild-eyed boy: he couldn't be more than i6 or r7. But in his hand was

some sort of gun, and it was pointing at Ben. Polly found herself wanting to move closer to Ben, but unable to move.

The woman was older, but equally panicked: she had nearly jumped out

of her skin when the rocket's lights had gone out.

`What's wrong?' she asked, her voice cracking.

THE ROCKET HAS POWERED DOWN. ON SCHEDULE. The robot's

tone didn't change, but it still managed to sound exasperated. SPINKS!

PUT THAT AWAY AND HELP KAY GET THE LIGHTING UNITS SET UP.

The wild-eyed boy — Spinks — shuffled, obviously unwilling to let Ben,

Polly and the Doctor out of his sights. The gun wavered uncertainly

between them. Polly bit her lip.

`But they killed him, Professor!'

The Doctor took a cautious step forward.

Ì'm sorry,' he said, his hands half raised, 'but if you look —'

DON'T BE RIDICULOUS, SPINKS! the robot interrupted. THE

STRANGERS' BIOSCANS AND SCRIVENS'S DON'T CONVERGE: THEY

HAVEN'T BEEN NEAR HIM. SCRIVENS KILLED HIMSELF.

The Doctor looked slightly put out.

`Well, yes, as I was going to say —'

`Killed himself.?' **the woman — Ray — said. She shivered, even in the humid conditions. The dreams...'**

THE LIGHTS! bellowed the robot.

Reluctantly, the woman and the boy turned to the box they'd dragged

into the dome. They started to pull cases and equipment from it,

including some powerful looking lights. As they worked, the robot

loomed over the Doctor. Without the blinding lights from the rocket,

Polly could see that it was basically a barrel chest on tank-treads, with a large glass dome for a head. In the gloom, Polly still thought she could see something grey and organic behind the glass.

WHAT ARE YOU the robot demanded.

The Doctor gave his most disarming smile.

`Well,' he bumbled. 'I'm the Doctor, and these are my friends: Ben, and

Polly. And you are?'

Something clicked inside the robot.

I SAID "WHAT", NOT WHO, it said. WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

WHO SENT YOU?

`No one sent us,' Ben argued. Polly found herself wishing he'd

leave it

to the Doctor, just this once. 'We just... arrived, didn't we, Doc?'

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ON CHARON? the robot barked. **IF SCRIVENS HADN'T DONE HIS JOB,**

THERE WOULDN'T EVEN BE AN ATMOSPHERE - AND YOU JUST

'ARRIVED'?

Polly couldn't help but look down. The rain was starting to melt the

frozen ground, pounding the congealing blood into the darkness.

Scrivens. The body had been a person. There was a look of such fear on its

face: if he had killed himself to escape some terror, it looked as if it had followed him even into death. The rain trickled down his face like tears.

`That's right,' she heard Ben snarl.

`Please,' Polly said, her eyes still on the body. Scrivens.

They all turned to look at her.

`Can't we do something about his body?'

There was silence, for a moment.

`Polly...' said the Doctor softly.

She couldn't tell if it was tears or rain that trickled down her cheeks.

In the end, the spacemen had covered the body up with a plastic tent. It

hadn't quite been what Polly had wanted, but the Doctor had explained as

gently as he could that the planet they were on was made up of solid ice,

and even in the temperate climate of the dome it was still too cold and

too

dense to dig any decent grave in. Polly did her best to look like she understood, and instead moved as far away from the body as the robot would allow.

Ben wanted to give her a hug, but didn't.

`We should leave,' Ray whispered.

Her companion didn't argue.

`Should've aborted soon as he contacted us,' Spinks muttered.

`Who contacted you?' Polly asked. She was sitting huddled by a lamp, under the protection of another plastic tent erected by Spinks a few minutes earlier. Ray and Spinks were now busying themselves with unloading the rest of the equipment from the sled they'd dragged with them. Was it Mr Scrivens?'

Spinks looked at her. A drop of rain dripped from the end of his nose.

`Listen, mate, why don't I give you a hand?' Ben offered coldly.

He strode over to the sled, ignoring the rain, and selected the heaviest-

looking object he could find. He hauled it out and up onto a shoulder, ignoring the burning in his muscles. The look on Spinks's face didn't alter, but he got the message.

`Where d'you want it?' Ben asked.

Spinks paused, then shrugged. He motioned to Ben's right.

`You're not part of this team,' Spinks growled. Ben guessed he was the

only one who could hear. 'Any minute, the Professor's going to finish

talking to your friend and you'll be going back to your ship and heading

off.'

He fixed Ben with a sullen glare.

`Right you are, mate,' Ben agreed cheerfully.

`Please,' Polly implored Ray. 'We only want to help.'

Ray looked to Spinks, but he was still lugging machinery. Ben set the

equipment he was carrying down with the rest, and caught Ray's eye. It

was only an excuse to catch his breath.

Àll right,' Ray said quietly, and joined Polly undercover.

Spinks snorted, but Ben ignored him.

Ìt started a week ago,' she said simply. Her hands sat in her lap, the

knuckles whitening as she gripped the one with the other. 'That's when

we received the radio message from Scrivens. The Professor had insisted

that we keep in regular contact, after what happened... with Ask.'

Ben looked to Polly, but she didn't acknowledge him. He crouched

down beside her, to get out of the rain. Still she ignored him.

Àsk?' Polly asked, confused.

`She came out first,' Ray answered softly. `Scrivens only volunteered

when we lost contact.'

`What happened to her?' Ben asked.

`She's dead!' Spinks barked, spitting into the rain. 'We're all dead.'

`We didn't think she'd made it,' Ray continued, unwilling or unable to

disagree with Spinks. 'But when Scrivens got here, he found the dome

already in place. He searched, but he couldn't find her anywhere. She just vanished. He told us, in that first contact. And he told us about his

dreams.'

For a moment, all Ben could hear was the rain, and Ray's voice.

`He had bad dreams,' she was saying. 'Black dreams. And they were

getting worse: by the time we'd passed Saturn he couldn't tell when he

was awake and when he was asleep. By Neptune, we couldn't get any

answer from him at all.'

She looked across at the tent containing his body.

There was water in her eyes.

`We don't get out ofhere,' Spinks growled, still shifting boxes, 'we'll be next.'

Polly looked to Ben. He wanted to tell her that the Doctor wouldn't

bring them anywhere like that, but he couldn't. He couldn't even convince himself that the impish little stranger was the Doctor.

The rain fell.

* * *

Polly caught Ben's eye: he looked so concerned, she wanted to take his hand and tell him it would be all right. But she didn't have the words. Instead she looked on helplessly as he frowned into the tent at them. Behind him, the boy Spinks busied himself emptying his sled, his hair slick to his skin. It steamed slightly in the tropical heat.

Was it getting hotter?

LISTEN HERE, came the mechanical bellow of the robot professor. **WE**

DON'T HAVE TIME TO WASTE. SPINKS, YOU WILL WORK WITH THE

DOCTOR. RAY, YOU WILL WORK WITH HIS FRIENDS. WE WILL

COMPLETE THIS MISSION, AND WE WILL RETURN HOME. Do **YOU**

UNDERSTAND?

Polly saw the Doctor hovering around the robot's legs like a schoolboy put on display in morning assembly.

`Thank goodness they've given up on this silly idea of us being spies,' she said, mostly to the Doctor.

He looked sheepish.

Àh, well, yes, Polly,' he said, fiddling with his handkerchief. 'And no.'

WE HAVE LIMITED TIME, the robot continued. Polly wondered whether

it had even heard her. **IF THERE MUST BE A RIVAL EXPEDITION, THEY**

MIGHT AS WELL WORK WITH US. WHERE I CAN KEEP TRACK OF THEM?

`But mostly no,' the Doctor said, with a resigned smile.

`What does it mean, limited time?' Ben asked.

The Doctor stepped forward to join them in their shelter.

`Well, Ben, this force field they've erected is a very clever piece of

technology: it lets them create an artificial atmosphere on Charon so they

can work without protective clothing and suchlike. But,' the Doctor fixed

them with a stern glare, 'but it's not entirely stable. You can see the

problems they're having maintaining a stable atmosphere already. As

time goes on...'

He didn't finish the sentence. Polly was quite grateful.

`Marvellous!' Ben turned away in exasperation.

The Doctor frowned at him.

`These people are pioneers, Ben,' he said sharply. 'Your descendents.

A few years from now, operations like these will be perfectly safe. But only because people like Professor Magellan and his team risked their lives to

test and refine the technologies involved. I think the least we can do is give them a little help, don't you?'

Ben didn't answer, just kicked at the ground looking suitably

chastened.

`But what are they doing here anyway, Doctor?' Polly asked. 'What is

there here that's worth that kind of risk?'

The robot professor must have overheard them.

WATER, it bellowed from where it was setting up the equipment Spinks

had unloaded. As **YOU WELL KNOW.**

`Water?' echoed Polly incredulously.

Òh, yes, Polly,' the Doctor added. 'We're quite a way into your future:

by now, humans have colonised the moon, Mars and many of Jupiter's

moons as well. Water is in short supply: even relatively small ice comets

are incredibly valuable.'

Ànd this rock is made out of ice,' Ben said.

Èxactly,' the Doctor said. 'There's plenty of water locked up in the

surface here that could be harvested without causing long-term damage.

I assume it will be used on one of the deep-space wheels, is that right, Professor?'

The robot didn't have any eyes, but somehow it managed to glare at the

Doctor.

`Well,' said the Doctor.

He was interrupted.

`Professor!' It was Ray. She sounded frightened. 'Professor!'

Polly looked to Ben.

`What is it?' Polly asked. Ben put his arm around her, but she barely

seemed to notice.

SOME KIND OF NATURAL FISSURE, Professor Magellan said

dismissively. **NOTHING TO GET EXCITED ABOUT.**

Ray didn't stop staring into the darkness. It was more than just

a fissure: it was a vast hole in the ground, probably opening up into caves and caverns and darkness. Ben felt a chill just looking into them.

He knew

he'd end up down there, crawling around in the dark.

Ì heard voices,' Ray said stubbornly.

Ànd I'm afraid the edges of this opening look too even for it to be

entirely natural,' the Doctor chipped in.

Ray groaned quietly. Spinks scowled at her. Possibly he could guess

what was coming as well.

ALL RIGHT, the Professor said.

Ben felt the tension go out of his limbs. It had been said.

`Right,' said the Doctor, clapping his hands. 'Ben and I will investigate.

Polly, you stay here with the others —'

No, the robot interrupted. YOU **ARE NOT MEMBERS OF THIS TEAM.**

YOU'RE **NOT GOING ANYWHERE WITHOUT SUPERVISION.**

Spinks didn't like that.

Àh no: I'm not going down there. I —'

You **AND RAY GET THE DRILL INTO POSITION,** the Professor said.

I'LL **GO.**

There was a moment's pause.

`Yeah, all right,' Spinks agreed, a little too enthusiastically.

`Doctor —' Polly said, but Ben cut her off.

`Come on Pol: you can stay up here safe and —' he nearly said 'dry'. 'No

need for us all to go messing about in caves.'

`That's not fair!' she complained.

The Doctor shook his head disarmingly.

`No, Polly — he's right. Besides,' his eyes twinkled, 'I'm sure there's lots you could be doing up here. Isn't that right Mr Spinks?'

Èxtra pair of hands wouldn't hurt,' Spinks agreed reluctantly.

`There you are,' the Doctor said.

Polly looked stern for a moment, but then smiled begrudgingly.

Polly stood for a while staring into the dark crack in the ground that her

friends had disappeared into. She thought about Scrivens and his dark

dreams, now forever laid to rest. She thought about Ask, the woman who

had disappeared long before they'd made it to the planet. She thought

about an indestructible old man who had become a vulnerable clown,

through some kind of magic.

The rain landed heavily on her skin, but she didn't feel it.

Àre you going to help or what?' Spinks shouted over.

Polly didn't move.

`Leave her alone,' Ray said, not unkindly. 'She's just worried.'

A sharp laugh from Spinks.

`She's worried? We're all going to die here.'

`Don't say that. Just... Don't.'

There was nothing she could do to help the Doctor and Ben. She just

had to trust that they'd be all right. But there was something she could do

here: these people were scared, and she could try to take that away. At

least for a moment.

`Why do you call him the Professor?' she asked, turning away from the cavern. It was as good a distraction as any.

`How d'you mean?' Ray asked.

`Well,' Polly felt silly saying it. 'He's just a robot, isn't he?'

Spinks looked to Ray. Neither spoke.

THERE WAS AN ACCIDENT.

The robot's voice echoed in the icy cavern, sounding all the more artificial and soulless. Ben had been worried that Magellan would have

trouble following them into the caverns, but once they were into the pit it opened out into a smooth tunnel. The Doctor had nodded as if he had expected as much, and warned them that they wouldn't be able to go too far before the artificial atmosphere started to thin. Ben had said that the robot would at least be able to continue. He was wrong.

MY BODY WAS DESTROYED. BUT I WAS LUCKY: MY BRAIN WAS UNDAMAGED, AND AN ALTERNATIVE WAS FOUND.

Ben shivered, and caught the Doctor's eye. The Doctor shook his head imperceptibly. Ben was glad that tunnel was dark enough for it to be impossible to study the grey mass inside the robo — the Professor's glass dome.

IT'S BETTER THAN DYING.

Ben thought about the taste of a decent beer, the smell of bangers and

mash and gravy, the feel of a girl's heart fluttering under your fingertips.

`What's that ahead?' the Doctor said suddenly.

Ben looked: he couldn't see anything.

Except...

Was it getting lighter?

`What is it?' Ben whispered.

`Why don't we go and find out?' was the Doctor's answer.

It didn't take them long. Around the next bend in the tunnel, it opened out into a vast cavern, the roof so high that the dim light barely reached it.

Crystals of ice sparkled in the white glow, reflecting and refracting in a myriad of strange patterns. The light came from a central sphere in the middle of the cavern, with seven thick legs coming away from it. They reminded Ben uncomfortably of coffins.

`What is it?' he asked again.

`Some kind of suspended animation,' the Doctor answered, already striding forwards to examine the machine. 'And still active.'

THERE IS NO WAY THIS PLANET WAS INHABITED, Professor Magellan growled. **IT'S AN AIRLESS ICEBALL IN SPACE!**

Òh, I doubt very much they're native,' the Doctor countered, wiping a thin layer of ice from one of the coffins. Ben could see a figure inside, humanoid but definitely not human. 'After all, you came here from elsewhere; why shouldn't they?'

AFTER THE WATER, Magellan said.

Ì don't think —' the Doctor paused, looking inside another of the

coffins.

`Doctor?' Ben's heart was starting to beat very fast. He blamed it on the

thin air.

The Doctor looked at him with old, cold eyes.

`There's a human in this casket.'

Magellan rolled it over.

IT'S ASK, he said grimly.

`What time is it?' Ray asked softly. 'Back home, I mean?'

Spinks snorted. 'We've done all we can here.'

Ì wonder how much longer they'll be,' Polly said, looking over towards

the darkness where the cavern lay.

Nobody answered her.

Ì hope they're —' she began.

But she was interrupted.

Professor Magellan burst out of the darkness in a plume of smoke, the

lights on his metal body flashing on and off in a frenzy. A few moments

behind him came Ben and the Doctor, both coughing furiously and

carrying between them a prone female figure dressed in a similar uniform

to Ray and Spinks. Polly ran over immediately, but Ben shrugged off her

efforts to help even as he coughed up thick black smoke.

`What happened?' Polly asked, frantic. 'Who's she? Ben?'

`He killed them,' Ben coughed. 'He killed them all!'

RAY. SPINKS. WE'VE FOUND ASK, Professor Magellan barked at his team. **GET HER INTO A TENT WITH A MEDI-VAC ON.** Now!

Ray and Spinks jumped out of their stunned silence and hurried to take

the woman from the Doctor and Ben. As they carried her over to Ray's

tent, Ben rounded on the Professor.

`You didn't have to do that!' he yelled into the impassive glass dome.

A light flickered deep inside, casting an electric blue sheen over the grey

brain. 'They were asleep. You killed them. In cold blood. You gunned

them down while they were sleeping!'

The Professor didn't answer. Polly felt ill.

Àll right, Ben,' the Doctor said softly, placing a hand on Ben's shoulder.

The sailor shook it off angrily.

`No!' he turned on the Doctor. 'We can't let him get away with murder!'

AND WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO? the Professor asked impassively.

Ben looked at the giant machine, his mouth hanging open.

Ì don't think we're in any position to argue, Ben,' the Doctor said,

fixing Magellan with a cold, sad look. 'After all, we're a threat to your

mission too, aren't we, Professor?'

Polly suddenly felt very cold.

THEY **WERE ALIENS,** Magellan said, ignoring the question.

`Yes,' the Doctor agreed, sadly. 'Intelligent life.'

Spinks appeared from out of the tent.

`She's stable,' he said, looking up nervously at Magellan. Polly

wondered how much of the conversation he'd heard.

GET ANOTHER TENT SET UP, the Professor ordered. **RAY CAN SHARE**

WITH THE GIRL. YOU'LL BE IN WITH THESE TWO. KEEP AN EYE ON

THEM. THEY'RE NOT TO LEAVE. UNDERSTAND?

Spinks didn't answer.

Ben didn't think he'd ever get to sleep. The rain hammered against the

thick plastic of the tent and the humidity made it hard to relax: how long

before the planet reverted to its icy, airless state? He tried not to think

about it. Spinks snored like a jet engine, which didn't help set his mind at ease. Nor did thinking about the white-haired old man he'd travelled

with, the one who wouldn't be afraid of confronting evil, no matter what

the risk to himself was.

But sleep he must have done, because he suddenly jolted awake again

kicking back against some dream monster. It faded fast, and by the time

he'd registered that he'd been asleep all he could remember was darkness **and** fear. A nightmare. Nothing more. What else could you expect, trying **to** sleep in this place? Scrivens' body was only in the next tent along, laid **out** in a parody of sleep.

Spinks had stopped snoring.

Ben decided to take advantage of this brief respite to try and get straight

back to sleep. He rolled over cautiously in his blanket — the tent was only intended to sleep two, and the Doctor was crammed in uncomfortably

next to Ben. Except, Ben realised, opening his eyes, he wasn't: Spinks and **the** Doctor were both missing.

Ben was out of the tent before he even registered he wasn't fully

dressed, his bare feet skidding on the slushy ground. Professor Magellan

was stood out there, looming ominously. The dim light threw long

shadows across his metallic bulk.

`Where are they?' Ben asked.

The Professor didn't answer. Ben looked around in the dark, but there

was no sign of them. Vague memories of his dream troubled him.

`Where did they *go?'* Ben shouted at Magellan.

The Professor's robotic body jerked suddenly.

I **WAS ASLEEP,** he said.

`What's wrong, Ben?' Polly said, climbing sleepily out of her tent.

`The Doctor's missing,' he said. `Spinks too.'

`We've got to find him: they could be hurt.'

I CAN FIND NO TRACE OF THEIR BIOSCANS WITHIN THE DOME.

Ben ran.

Polly stumbled after him, Magellan trundling after her, as he hurried

into the darkness. The rain soon soaked him, but at least he was only

in

his sleeping gear. There was no sign of anyone, not even the faint glow of

a light from the Doctor's lamp. Where would they have gone without

lights? Ben shook his head, trying not to panic.

He headed towards the TARDIS.

`Ben, where are you going?' Polly asked. 'I can't see!'

But Ben didn't answer. He had a terrible premonition. He could feel the

darkness closing in on him, the air hot and heavy, making it hard to

breath. He felt that at any moment he might kick off the sheets and wake

in a sweat soaked cot. He felt that something was reaching for him, out of

the darkness. Long slender fingers gripping his heart, like ice. He

couldn't breath any more: had he run clean out of the dome?

Polly screamed.

`Ben!'

And suddenly it was gone, taking all his strength with it. He collapsed

to his knees, panting hard. His hands hit the ground. Not the ground:

there was something there, in front of him.

`Ben what happened? I saw —'

`Stay there Polly!' he shouted.

But it was too late: her concern had brought her straight to him in the

darkness, and she was already by his side trying to help him to his feet.

She saw the tangled mess on the ground in front of them. Saw the

crystals

of frozen red blood.

They had found Spinks.

Polly had managed to get Ben back to the camp and into some waterproof

clothing. He had wanted to go straight to the TARDIS and check it was

still there, but Polly knew that would just be a waste of time. Besides

which, Professor Magellan wouldn't let them out of his sight, and Polly

didn't want him seeing the TARDIS. At the moment, the robot-professor

was over by his drilling equipment trying to calm Ray. He must have

turned the volume down on his voice, because Polly couldn't hear a word

either of them were saying.

`He's gone, Pol,' Ben said sadly. 'He's left us.'

Polly tutted.

`Don't be silly. The Doctor wouldn't do that.'

He turned to look into her eyes, imploring. There was something there

that she couldn't quite identify. A shadow. She shivered.

`How do we know he's the Doctor?' he said. 'I mean really him? People

don't just change like that.'

Polly gave him her sternest look.

`Don't be silly, Ben. We've been through this before! People don't do

a lot of things that the Doctor does: that doesn't stop him, does it? He'll

be out there somewhere trying to stop that thing, and we've got to help

him. We agreed!'

`You agreed,' Ben wanted to say. But instead he asked, 'What thing?'

`Didn't you see it?' Polly couldn't believe it: it had been right on top of

him. 'Out there, when we found... There was a shadow. A darkness. It was

all over you. Didn't you see it?'

`No,' Ben said, but for a minute that shadow passed over his eyes again.

Ì felt something. I don't...'

Ìt's got to be something to do with those coffins you found. Those poor

people...' Polly shook her head. There wasn't time for this now. Later.

Always later. 'I bet that's where the Doctor is.'

Ben didn't look convinced.

There was a cry from behind them.

Àsk!' Ray shouted, leaving Magellan and running for the tent.

The tent flew open, and a wild-eyed blonde exploded out into the warm

rain, her uniform in shreds. She was screaming incoherently, raging at

ghosts only she could see. Polly could have cried to see it: she knew now

that whatever the alien creatures had done to Ask, it had driven the poor

woman mad.And Polly knew she and Ben were going to have to risk the

same madness if they were going to help the Doctor.

`Why did you do it?' Ask was screaming, spitting her words right into

Ray's face as the smaller woman tried to calm her. 'They need me. They

need another. It's free, it's free, it's free!'

`Professor, help!' Ray squeaked.

The Professor lumbered over to the two women, a needle protruding

from one of his fingers.

`Come on,' Ben whispered into Polly's ear.

She didn't want to leave. She was worried about Ask, about Ray. She was

worried because she knew where Ben would be taking her. But the Doctor

might need their help. She nodded quietly, and let Ben lead her away into

the darkness.

Into the pit.

Ben knew something was wrong as soon as they *entered* the cavern:

everything was as they had left it before, except the globe at the centre of the caskets was no longer glowing white. Instead it flickered on and off,

never quite reaching its full brightness but neither did it go fully dark. Ben couldn't help but look into one of the coffins: the alien inside was gone,

dried to dust. He felt he should say something, but nothing seemed

appropriate.

`Ben!' Polly cried, pointing into another of the caskets. 'Look!'

Ben hurried over and looked inside.

The Doctor was lying there, his face creased in concentration.

`We've got to get him out,' Ben said decisively.

I DON'T THINK SO.

Ben didn't need to look to know that Magellan would be pointing his

pistol-finger at them: he raised his hands slowly, and nodded to Polly to

do the same. Slowly they turned around: the Professor loomed over them,

pointing both hands at them. Ray was hovering around his feet, unwilling

to step out on her own and accept responsibility for what was bound to

come.

WHAT IS THIS THING? Magellan asked. WHY ARE YOU SO

INTERESTED IN IT?

Ben didn't say anything He didn't want to admit that he didn't have a

clue. Instead he started edging sideways, trying to give Magellan a

decision about who to shoot first. Maybe Polly could escape.

I HAVE PISTOLS IN BOTH HANDS, Magellan said conversationally.

I CAN FIRE AT THE SAME TIME WITH ONLY A THOUGHT. SO YOU HAD

BETTER START ANSWERING MY —

Polly screamed.

Ray turned sharply, and joined in.

A vast black shadow loomed up behind them, spreading itself wide like

two great hands, ready to snatch them up. The entire chamber went icy

cold. Ben was reminded of his dreams.

STOP IT! Magellan snapped. THERE'S NOTHING THERE!

The shadow's maw opened, and snapped closed around one of the

Professor's outstretched arms. In a shower of sparks, it was ripped clean

off. Magellan gave an electronic howl, and spun quickly around, backing

away to join Ben and Polly. Ray had already dived for cover behind the

caskets: Ben could hear her whimpering softly to herself about

nightmares and shadows.

I CAN'T SEE ANYTHING THERE! Magellan cried. There seemed to be an

edge of panic in his synthesised voice. WHAT IS IT?

The shadow swelled to twice its original size, filling the entire chamber

with darkness. The globe above the caskets flickered like a fluorescent

bulb.

`Hungry,' Ben said.

The shadow lunged.

* * *

Polly screamed as the darkness loomed at them, its mouth a blood red

maw ready to devour them all. Her nightmares were coming true, and just

like a dream she was rooted to the spot, unable to move.

The globe on the machine behind them burst into light.

There was a furious roar, and a wall of water shot up in front of them.

The shadow lunged, hit the water and roared. And it fell back.

WHAT'S HAPPENING? Magellan demanded.

Ìt can't get through the water!' Ben shouted, almost laughing.

WHAT WATER? Magellan shouted.

Polly didn't hear if Ben tried to explain — how could he even hope to

begin, when the world was turning upside down like this? She was

distracted by the way the water in front of them bubbled and seethed as

the darkness pawed at it. In places, the water parted for an instant, almost letting the creature through. It couldn't last for long. They had to do

something.

She had no idea what.

`Ben, Polly,' came a familiar voice.

`Doctor?' Polly cried, but he still lay unmoving in his casket. 'Where are

you?'

A face appeared in the water, winking at them.

`Doctor?' Ben said.

`There's not much time, I'm afraid,' the Doctor said apologetically. His

face flickered like a bad radio signal. 'The cell's meant to be maintained

by a team of seven: I'm doing the best I can, but...'

`Cell?' Ben echoed.

Tor the shadow,' the Doctor answered. 'When Professor Magellan

killed the warders, I'm rather afraid he released it. When I saw it attacking poor Mr Spinks, I realised straightaway.'

You **CAN'T BLAME THIS ON ME! Magellan** argued.

Ì can and I do, Professor,' the water-Doctor said sternly. His face

creased as the shadow creature batted at the wall of water again. 'But for

now I need your help.'

`What do we do?' Polly asked.

`Get into the caskets. Professor, you'll find an input jack under the

nearest casket. The cell will do the rest.'

`But there's only four of us,' Ben argued.

The creature roared, and the Doctor's face disappeared.

`Doctor!' Ben shouted.

There wasn't time for this.

`Quickly everyone, into the caskets,' Polly started pulling the casket lids

open as fast as she could. 'Ray, please. We've got to help the Doctor.'

Ben gave her a look, but she didn't have time to respond, other than

with a snappish 'Now, Ben!'

Reluctantly, Ben and Ray started clambering into the dusty caskets.

There was another roar, and the wall of water breached. It fell like rain

all around them.

The shadow leapt forwards, and the world went dark.

For a moment, all was confusion and panic. That moment stretched,

became an eternity, became water, froze. Ben couldn't see anything, but

he was aware of a darkness surrounding a globe of white light. He felt

cold, and hot, and scared, and elated, and a thousand contradictory

things all at once. And suddenly he realised he wasn't alone. Wasn't really

himself any more. Was something new.

He felt Polly burning fiercely in his mind, willing the Doctor to succeed,

willing to do anything to help him. He felt Ray, confused and frightened

and hearing Ben discovering her mind and being confused and frightened

by that. He felt Magellan, cold and isolated, unable to comprehend the

sensations he was having. And behind them all, he felt a massive power,

guiding, protecting. Trying to keep them all safe. Trying to keep the whole

universe safe, if it could.

`Nearly,' said a voice. 'Concentrate, concentrate.'

And Ben recognised the voice, as it came again and again in a fall of

recursion. It was the voice of a black-haired little imp. It was the voice of a white-haired old man. It was the voice of a 13-sided gemstone, with

facets and reflections that spiralled into infinity within its heart.

`Trust me, Ben,' the voice said.

He was the Doctor.

Ben's mind opened like a flower, and he wasn't Ben any longer.

BenPollyRayMagellanTheDoctor concentrated the power of its mind

and the white light burned like a sun. The darkness tried to fall away

from

it, but it wasn't fast enough. Where its fingers touched the light, they

burned. As it scrambled to get away, so the light drew it in like a magnet.

For a moment, it was a shadow on the sun.

Then it was gone.

Polly felt an unexplained feeling of reliefwhen she saw the TARDIS sitting

incongruously on the icy ground. Like she'd come home after

a particularly gruelling journey. Except the TARDIS wasn't her home. Her

home was out there thousands of years ago, and she had a long way to go

before she got there.

The Doctor set the lamp down on the ground, and started patting his

pockets searching for the key. Ben watched him with a wry smile on his

face. Polly couldn't help smiling back.

'Ah!' said the Doctor triumphantly, pulling the key from his shoe.

Ì still don't see why we can't make sure they're all right,' Polly said,

looking back over to the camp. 'Ray and Ask didn't want any of this to

happen. We can't leave them with Magellan.'

Òh, they'll be all right, Polly,' the Doctor answered solemnly. 'He needs

them to finish the harvest. Besides which, Magellan can't fly the rocket on

his own. And once they get back to Earth, I'm sure they'll tell the

authorities what happened.'

`Still doesn't mean we have to do a moonlight flit, does it?' Ben chipped

in. 'They might need a hand.'

A shadow crossed the Doctor's face.

Àh,' he said.

Polly's suspicions grew.

`Doctor?' she said sternly. 'What exactly did you do?'

The Doctor looked down at the ground like a naughty schoolboy.

`The shadow was a pan-dimensional creature, Polly. It operated in this

dimension as almost pure thought. Pure malevolence. The poor creatures

who built the cell designed it to keep the shadow trapped in the heart of

the planet, and then used their own mental powers to lock the door.

Presumably there was some kind of accident, and they recruited Ask to

replace one of the original warders when she arrived here. But her mind

wasn't strong enough, poor thing. And then when Magellan destroyed the

creatures...'

`He unlocked the door,' Ben finished .

`But that doesn't explain why we can't stay,' Polly said. 'You've locked

the shadow up again, haven't you?'

`Yes, in a way.' The Doctor said. Polly frowned at him. 'There weren't

enough of us to form a stable mental barrier, Polly. And even if there had

been, we would've had to stay in the caskets to maintain it.'

`So what did you do?' Ben asked. 'Where is the shadow?'

Èxactly where it was before,' he said quietly. 'Trapped beneath the ice

of Charon. But not all of it: while it was in the cell, I took the opportunity to remove some of its more aggressive impulses. Now it's little more than

a big pussy cat. Although it will still give people some interesting dreams.'

`Where did you put them, Doctor?'

The Doctor smiled, and opened the TARDIS door.

`Somewhere safe,' he said.

* * *

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BenPollyRayMagellanTheDoctor flexed its mental muscles, and reached

out to the shadow. The shadow tried its best to claw its way free of the

gestalt's grip, but wherever darkness touched light the darkness burned

with a cold blue fire. BenPollyRayMagellanTheDoctor dug in, and pulled

the shadow within itself.

For a moment, BenPollyRayMagellanTheDoctorShadow looked out at

the world, and saw the light grow in intensity and fire. Purifying them.

Then the light flicked out.

BenS, Pollyll, RayA, MagellanD and TheDoctorOW woke up.

Ben and Polly slept as the TARDIS spiralled through the Vortex.

And if they dreamt of shadows, then it didn't trouble them at all.

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Sedna

Andy Frankham

An Adventure of the Third ***Doctor,***

with ***Jeremy*** Fitzoliver

Hope.

It permeated everything they passed, enveloping the city in an

atmosphere of love and contentment. Like a ripple, it moved through the

inhabitants; a spirit of optimism.

Or at least that was how it seemed to Jeremy as he sat by the window,

watching the metropolis go by.

Below he could see people dancing in the streets, their bristles painting

the ground as they moved, their six upper limbs weaving a complex

pattern in the air. Jeremy felt the urge to jump out of the window and join

them, and it was only Aquati's arms, wrapped around Jeremy's shoulders,

that prevented him.

From this high above the city, Jeremy could see no sign of a people at

war, and once again he doubted the Doctor's earlier revelation.

He looked to the Doctor, ***no longer*** caring about ***the red*** dust ***getting in*** his mouth. ***He***

could do nothing but smile. 'Those building ***are rather...*** well...'

The Doctor just ***nodded. 'Yes,'*** he said through gritted teeth. 'They are

rather splendid, aren't they?' He ***frowned.*** 'What an unfortunate ***discovery.'***

What?'

`The buildings ***before us, Jeremy. I've*** seen their like before, and that can only mean

that the people attacking the Siccati ***on Neptune*** are Siccati ***themselves.'***

Jeremy looked back at the dome. 'And you can tell just by ***seeing the*** city?'

'Oh, yes, I'm afraid so. You ***see, the*** Siccati are unlike any ***race I've ever*** encountered.

There is nothing about them that isn't beauty personified. ***No one creates art like***

them, no one. And that ***extends*** to their ***dwellings.*** But ***I've seen some of the results of***

what *the* Siccati on ***this planet are doing to Neptune,*** and I can ***assure*** you that...'

Whatever the ***Doctor was going to*** say ***was drowned out by a strange squelching***

sound, reminding Jeremy efingers moving about in wet putty. Both men ***searched***

the horizon for ***the source of the sound. Jeremy noticed the small hole opening near*** the top of ***the*** dome, but it ***was*** the Doctor ***who realised what*** it meant. His warning,

however, came too late.

The vibrations hit the ground circling ***the edge of the dome.*** All around them the planet shook. The scarlet dust kicked up. Like a tidal ***wave the*** ground shifted, and both men ***were lifted into the*** air. They landed in a heap ***several feet away.***

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Together they *watched as* the missile *ascended* into the black sky *above.* It twisted its way up, *leaving* behind a sparkling cloud of *different*

colours. Something about *the way the* colours *danced against the* dark sky *made Jeremy smile.* It *was* not a smile the Doctor *shared,* for *he knew what the rocket meant.*

'It's on its *way* to *Neptune,' he said, 'where* it will kill hundreds. *I've seen* it land.'

The Doctor let out a sad sigh. 'Even in war the Siccati create a work of art.'

Jeremy looked over at the Doctor, who appeared to be sulking. The old

man was looking out of another window, pointedly ignoring both Jeremy

and the ubiquitous Aquati. Jeremy understood the Doctor's mood. He was

a man not used to being so easily dismissed, although secretly Jeremy

found it a little amusing.

The person before *him looked like a man, albeit a man* with six *arms and* what appeared to *be* a brush *where his legs should have been.* That in *itself was* a surprise to Jeremy, but not as much *as the man's* face. His nose sat on his left *cheek, while his eyes* looked *like* three *eggs* dropped haphazardly into afrying pan. As for his mouth

— of such a thing *there* was no sign. Jeremy rubbed his temples, suddenly *feeling a* little dizzy.

And my *eyes are* truly beholding you!' the Siccati said with *a huge smile, his eyes wide* with joy. *'I could just* gobble you all up. And those boots!' He pointed one of his arms at the boots in question. 'You simply *have* to *be* artists like us?'

Jeremy looked *down and* for the first time noticed just how much his boots had changed since leaving the TARDIS. 'Oh, I say!' The white fur had been fluffed up by the outside *winds and dyed* bright pink by *the* dust. He *looked* back up, his cheeks almost matching the boots in colour.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows in disbelief. look, *never* mind Jeremy's boots.

I *need to see whoever's in charge* of this settlement.'

The Siccati *smiled* broadly at the Doctor. 'You do, *do* you? And just who are you?'

'I'm the Doctor and this is Jeremy.'

The Siccati *bowed. 'Aquati>Ntism* as your *guide.'*

The Doctor *relaxed. 'Now* that *we have* the introductions out of the way, can you *please* direct me to„.?'

'Completely out of the question. And speaking *of* questions, as *we* just *were,* you *have* yet to answer my own simple question. Are you artists?'

The Doctor *regarded Jeremy* and his pink boots, *and then* smiled. 'I can't speak for my friend *here,* but I *have been known to have* an artistic bent. *Indeed,* it *has often been noted* that I am a bit of a showman.' As if to prove the point the Doctor threw off his ADJ and stood *there,* his arms open *wide,* showing off his *green* smoking jacket *and* the frills of his shirt.

Aquati looked him up and down and *waved* him away. 'Yes, how wonderful and 210

delightful you must be,' he said in a tone that *suggested he meant* anything but. 'And you, my vibrant friend ?'

For a few moments Jeremy wondered what Aquati could mean, and then he remembered the pink boots and his bright coloured shirt. 'Oh, well, I *was very good at art* in prep school. My *etching* of Arthur Askey's *nose* always made the teacher *smile.*

She even once had to *leave the classroom because she was so overcome by how super* it was. At least *that's* what *she* told *me,' he added* lamely as the truth *began* to sink in.

The Doctor shook his *head, bemused.*

Aquati *clapped* his hands enthusiastically. *'Wonderful! I just knew* it!' He *bristled forward and hugged Jeremy. 'Well, welcome once more.* If you *desire* to *make* audience with *the Arrangers* then your primary Commission must *be* to establish your capacity *for* artistic *endeavours.* Only *the finest can* be brought *before the Arrangers.'*

'Of course, *I remember now,' the* Doctor said. 'I've read about this.' He

winked *at Jeremy, and the young man nodded back sagely. 'Very well, lead us* to *the Commissioning Hall,' he said, turning back* to Aquati.

The Siccati *gave a wide* smile and turned to *go.*

The Doctor picked up his Atmospheric Density Jacket and *Jeremy sidled* up to him.

There is something decidedly fishy about this alien. His face keeps on changing.'

'Oh, yes, don't worry about it too much, Jeremy. As my *old friend Pug once explained, the* Siccati's *features change* with their disposition, movement and *the perception of the one viewing* them. Human *physiognomy simply doesn't allow you to observe* the full effect. *Not a problem* I *have, of course,' the Doctor concluded* with a smug smile.

His smugness did not last long, since Aquati pretty much ignored the

Doctor from therein. No matter how much the Doctor talked, all of

Aquati's attention was focused on Jeremy. Which was why even now the

Siccati was snuggled up to him, as the train shot them through the city to

the Commissioning Hall.

They entered the Hall, and Jeremy came to a stop. It was one of the most

ornately decorated places he had ever seen. Before them was a hall half the

size of Twickenham Stadium, with pillars reaching up to the ceiling like

the ribcage of a large animal. The ceiling itself was one big painting.

Jeremy was not sure what the painting was of, but he liked it. Full of

colour and life... it made him feel tiny and insignificant, without a care in the world.

Along the length of the hall ran little alcoves, some lit, while others

were in darkness. The ones that were lit contained various Siccati, all

doing the same thing. Creating works of art.

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Jeremy looked to the Doctor for an explanation.

Ìt's quite simple. The Siccati you see in here wish to have an audience

with their leaders, the Arrangers. Naturally there are not only painters and sculptors who require the audience; there are writers, poets, musicians

They'll be at their homes working on their magna opera, hoping to

produce something truly incredible, something that will provoke a sense

of wonder in the Arrangers. If it's something mundane, then it will be

placed in the Museum of Rejects, which in itself is quite an honour, but

obviously not quite the honour they would get from meeting the

Arrangers.' The Doctor stopped to ponder this, then smiled. 'Shouldn't

be too much of a problem for me to meet them, then '

Aquati waved them towards two alcoves that still sat in darkness.

`Come, come. For you, Thedoct>Orism,' he said and pointed to the first

alcove. It lit up all by itself and the Doctor stepped in. 'Anything that you might desire you will find in there.'

The Doctor nodded, looking around at the empty space. 'Um, some

utensils might not go amiss, old chap. An easel, some paint... Anything?'

Aquati shook his head. 'Bless the non-Siccati. You simply have no

concept of what it is to Commission, have you?'

The Doctor rubbed the back of his neck. 'Mind power, maybe?'

Aquati laughed. The sound was so sweet that Jeremy could not help but

smile, feeling a warm glow inside. Aquati pointed with one of his six

arms. 'On the contrary, my foolish friend. Ask and you shall receive.'

The Doctor looked, and for the first time noticed a small tube encrusted

with jewels protruding from the far wall in the alcove. Àh, I see.' He

stepped further into the space, and spoke into the tube. 'Hello, hello,

anybody home? What shall we start with? Oh, yes, an easel. May I have an

easel, please?'

With a humming an easel materialised next to the Doctor. He stepped

back, impressed despite himself.

`Capital. Now, stand back Pablo, my dear fellow.'

`There, all done.'

The Doctor stepped back to admire his painting, and rubbed his hands

on the smock her wore over his shirt. Before he could decide on how

much he liked it he heard a rustling sound behind him, so he turned

around to find Aquati standing there, regarding the painting too. The

Doctor grinned.

`What do you think?'

Aquati walked into the alcove to look closer. The oil painting depicted a

nice summer scene, with two woman dressed in Victorian dresses playing

in a field. The Doctor glanced up at the painting on the ceiling, and

nodded with satisfaction. His own was as vibrant as anything he had seen

the Siccati make.

Aquati did not say a word, he simply turned away and left the alcove.

The Doctor watched him go, then looked at his painting. He ran a finger

along his bottom lip, and looked back at Aquati's retreating form. 'Van

Gogh would've been proud!' he shouted at the Siccati.

There was no reaction from Aquati; he simply entered the alcove in

which Jeremy was working.

The Doctor straightened his back and, clearing his throat loudly, he

went to see what Jeremy had cobbled together.

Jeremy's alcove was a mess, and very full. In the middle stood a pottery

wheel, covered in clay. Whatever it was that Jeremy had been making, he

had certainly thrown himself into it. Bits of wet clay was scattered all over the place... the walls, the floor, and the apron that Jeremy wore. At the

back there sat a kiln, the door of which Jeremy was opening carefully with

his gloved hands.

Èxcuse me, old chap,' the Doctor said as he manoeuvred himself past

Aquati, so that he could get a better look at what Jeremy was pulling out

of the kiln. The Doctor put a hand over his mouth to hide his smile, and

for his troubles he ended up with paint on his lips.

Jeremy turned around and placed his unique creation on top of the pottery wheel. It was a vase, painted a warm shade of blue. He looked down at it, and tilted his head to one side. 'Oh, dear,' he said.

`Well done, Jeremy,' the Doctor commented, being as polite as he could.

`Perhaps another attempt is needed? You know, practice makes perfect and all that.'

Crestfallen, Jeremy looked to the floor.

The Doctor bit his lip and walked over to Jeremy, placing an arm around his young friend. 'Never mind, as long as one of us impresses the Arrangers, eh? Tell you what, when this is all done I'll take you to a little planet I know. The best potters that ever existed. They'll happily teach you...' He trailed off as his eyes came to rest on Aquati, who was still standing at the entrance of the alcove.

For a brief second the Doctor was convinced that he saw a head full of eyes, each one wide open in unsuppressed awe, but then he shook his own head and blinked rapidly. Once more he saw the face of a normal man, albeit a man wearing an expression of wonderment.

`What is it, old man?' he asked.

`Beautiful. And expressive,' Aquati said in a gentle harmony.

Ìt is?' Jeremy asked despite himself.

The Siccati looked at Jeremy. 'Absolutely. The beauty lies in its imperfection, the simplicity of awkwardness.' He held his arms out

towards Jeremy, as if he was beckoning the young man over. 'Much like

you, Jerem>Yism, it is an imperfect work of art, and in being so it is

perfect.'

The Doctor looked from Aquati to Jeremy, and then to the object in

question. Granted, it was a brave attempt, but it was nothing to write

home about. The vase was an odd shape, although the Doctor was certain

that was not by design, rather a result of Jeremy's clumsiness.

`Just as well you're not an Arranger, then,' the Doctor muttered.

`Speaking of whom, I think it's time we presented our Commissions to

the Arrangers.'

`There is no need for such excessive actions, Thedoct, the Arrangers can

see all that transpires in the Commissioning Hall. They will make their

judgement in due time.' Aquati stopped as a tinkling sound came from

nearby. 'Indeed, I would say that they have made their judgement.'

Curious, the Doctor and Jeremy followed Aquati from one alcove to the

other. The Doctor was pleased to note that it was his alcove that they

approached. They all stopped on the threshold, just in time to witness the

entire alcove empty itself of everything that had occupied it. The Doctor's

painting included.

À success?' the Doctor enquired, although he knew the answer.

`Not in the slightest. Your miserable attempt has been transferred to the

Museum of Rejects where it shall be shunned for as long as the Siccati live

on this world.'

Not the answer the Doctor had expected.

Jeremy patted the Doctor awkwardly on the back. 'Hard luck. Still, there

must be some other way we can see these Arranger chappies, isn't there?'

The Doctor sighed. 'No, Jeremy, there isn't. This means I shall have to

try again and if I fail I shall try again after that.' He brightened up with a grin. 'If nothing else it will at least give me a chance to hone a talent.'

Aquati let out a groan. 'Let's hope we are spared such things. Indeed, if

I am any judge of art, and I really am, then I suspect we will indeed be

spared that disaster.'

A troop of trumpets began to play. The Doctor shook his head, fearing

he knew where the sound was coming from. Sure enough, when he

looked, he found that Jeremy's alcove was bathed in light. Hardly able to

contain his excitement, Jeremy rushed over to his alcove to see, followed

quickly by Aquati. The Doctor watched, grinding his teeth all the while.

`They call that art?' he asked himself, and ripped the cloth hat off his

head and threw it into his alcove. 'Unbelievable He had a good mind to

stay where he was, but as usual his curiosity got the better of him and he

was soon standing by Jeremy and Aquati.

The alcove had been cleaned of the mess Jeremy had left in his wake. In

its place was one of the most elegant tables the Doctor had ever seen, on

which sat the vase, taking pride of place in the middle of the alcove. The

walls were painted in a pleasing shade of green, with beige drapes on the

back wall. The Doctor had to admit, to himselfat least, he was impressed.

Aquati clapped his hands. 'Congratulations, Jerem, you have succeeded

in gaining an audience with the Arrangers. They will inform you as and

when you can see them.'

Jeremy felt that warm glow again. 'Oh, I say! That is rather super.'

The Doctor nodded gravely. 'Yes, Jeremy, it's up to you to convince them

to stop this awful war. Well done.'

Òh,' Jeremy said, his euphoria slipping, 'fishhooks!'

The Doctor looked up from his new painting, the brush still touching the

canvas. He glanced over at Jeremy who stood by the edge of the alcove.

The young man had cleaned himself up and, with the exception of the

pink boots, looked like his old self again. The Doctor nodded.

Ì'm quite certain, Jeremy. Go out and explore, there's not a lot else you

can do while you wait for your audience. I, on the other hand, have some

painting to do. We can't have you meeting the Arrangers on your own, can

we?'

`Lord no.'

`Besides, while Aquati>Ntism is showing you around, you can see ifyou

can learn something about this war.' He scratched the edge of his right

eyebrow and added, 'Like why it's happening, for example.'

Jeremy smiled at this. 'Oh, rather. I've always wanted to be an

investigative journalist. If I pull this off you can tell Sarah, and she can put in a good word for me with Percy.'

The Doctor did not answer. He did not want to burst the young man's

bubble. If there was one thing he liked about Jeremy it was his willingness

to help, and the way he always dived into things with enthusiasm. It was

just a pity that he was not very good at most of the things he took part in.

Investigating was one of them.

`Run along, then, Jeremy. Hopefully you will stumble across something

useful.'

He was not doing so well at all, having managed to lose not only Aquati

but himself too. As much as he liked to pretend otherwise, Jeremy knew

he was not cut out for investigating anything, but he so wanted to be

good

at it. He watched the way journalists worked at Metropolitan and was

always amazed by how easy it seemed. Jeremy was not sure what it was

about him, but he knew he tried, knew he threw himself into everything

they asked him to do. Always he ended up making a fool of himself. When

he left the Doctor at the Commissioning Hall he had decided that he was

going to prove himself; show the Doctor that he had what it took, and yet

here he was...

All he'd had to do was follow Aquati and keep his eyes and ears open for

any indication of why the Siccati were invading their fellows on Neptune.

Not a difficult task by any means, and yet somehow he had managed to

make a right pig's ear of it. Wandering through the city with no idea

where he was heading or where he had been.

He heard a sound behind him. He carried on forward, but glanced back

hoping to catch sight of whatever creature had made the strange sound.

His attention focused elsewhere, Jeremy did not notice the small piece

of metal sticking out of the ground beneath him. He lost his footing,

twisted and toppled over, letting out a cry of horror, which cut off

suddenly when his head connected with something cold and hard.

Jeremy was awoken some time later by the rumbling from below. He

opened his eyes wide in shock and rolled over. The ground beneath him

was metal! Unwisely he jumped to his feet and immediately felt dizzy. He

stumbled backwards, reaching out for anything that would help him

balance. He found nothing and fell onto his behind.

He sat there for a while, taking in the odd sight. At the end of the alley

he had walked down, in a wide opening was what appeared to be a metal

lid lying in the dirt. He got to his feet again, slower and more careful this time, and walked over to the lid. It was indeed metal, smooth and shiny,

reflecting the colourful walls of the buildings surrounding it. The

diameter of the lid was twice that of a man. Jeremy noticed the handle in

the middle of the lid and realised that was what had caught his foot.

He reached out for the handle and gripped. He pulled, but nothing

happened. Gritting his teeth, he tried again, putting all his strength into

it. The handle gave, but it did not lift up as Jeremy had expected, instead

it twisted around.

The metal beneath him began to shake and he jumped off the lid in

surprise.

`Whoops,' he said.

He stood there and watched as the lid slowly rose up. Jeremy's eyes

widened in wonder. The lid was simply the top of some sort of lift. Once

it had stopped moving, he cautiously peered inside. It was empty. He

looked around, to see if any Siccati were watching, and seeing no one he

decided to enter the lift and hope.

As the lift started its descent beneath the surface of Sedna, Jeremy felt

his heart begin to beat faster, sweat starting to fall. Too late he realised that he had no idea what he would find underground.

Jeremy found himselfin a small cavern. He was no expert, but he assumed

it had been dug out by the Siccati, and the support struts he could see

added weight to his theory. Not surprisingly, even the support struts were

the most intricate design, encrusted with flashy jewels and painted in

soothing colours.

In the centre of the cavern was what appeared to be a giant egg.

Although four times bigger than Jeremy, the way it was decorated

reminded him ofart class when he was a boy. He smiled at the memory and

walked over to the egg. He ran his hand over the surface, and was surprised

by how smooth it was. Jeremy was amazed, and began to see the Siccati in

a new light. The skill they must have had to create such a perfect thing...

His hand came to a stop, as he noticed the pit beneath the egg. He knelt

down, and shouted into the pit. There was no echo. Jeremy gulped as a

strange thought entered his head. 'Now why would they have something

like this hanging over a shaft that's so deep it produces no echo? Unless

they...' He trailed off. 'Good lord, no, they wouldn't. Would they?'

He stood up quickly and searched around the cavern for a timer, but

found no such thing.

He looked over at the egg again. 'It's a bomb,' he breathed.

It was hopeless. He had no idea where he was going. So intent had he

been on looking for clues, that he had paid no attention to where Aquati

had actually led him. He had to get back to the Doctor, to tell him about

the bomb, but how could he do that if he had no idea where he was?

A loud series of cheers broke through Jeremy's concerns. He followed

the sound, and found himself at the edge of a large square opening. Well

over a hundred Siccati were crowded there, all looking to the sky above,

singing in perfect harmony.

Jeremy peered up in time to see the tail end of a missile disappear

through the hole in the dome. The hole closed, but the dancing light

could still be seen in the Sednan sky. Jeremy swallowed hard... another

missile heading for Neptune.

He looked at the Siccati, and was disgusted by the look of delight on

their faces.

The façade of beauty was slipping...

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He glanced around, wondering just how to get back to the Doctor and warn him about the madness, when he spotted the monorail heading away from the square.

Jeremy slapped his head. Of course! He should have thought of that before. The train had, after all, taken them to the Commissioning Hall in the first place.

He began pushing through the crowd.

The Doctor gently tapped the chisel, putting the finishing touches to his very own venduta ideata.

`Doctor!'

His hand slipped.

Letting out a curse, the Doctor turned around slowly.

Jeremy had entered the alcove, and was now bent double taking deep breaths. The Doctor was so furious at being disturbed that he paid Jeremy's condition no heed.

`Now look what you've made me do!' the Doctor said through gritted teeth. 'This was the one, Jeremy; this would have got me an audience.'

Jeremy looked up, his face red, presumably noticing the damage he had caused. 'Awfully sorry, Doctor,' he began, but then he shook his head and

took another deep breath. 'Dash that, no I'm not. This is much more

important than a simple engraving.'

À simple engraving? This, my dear chap, this is the finest example since

Paranesi's engravings of Rome... indeed, since he's not going to be born

for millions of years, it's probably the finest veduta in the Solar System. It is a glimpse of hope. The Siccati living in peace. Look, there we are,' the

Doctor said as his pointed. 'Uniting the two halves...' He tailed off,

noticing the way Jeremy was verily dancing on the spot, and folded his

r

arms impatiently. 'Oh, very well, this had better be good. Go on.'

`Right, well...' For a moment it looked like the young man was unsure

about how to begin, then he blurted out; 'I found a bomb!' Before the

Doctor could say anything he carried on. 'I got lost, I think Aquati must

have lost me on purpose, after all my sense of direction isn't all that bad

and...' He came to a stop, seeing the look on the Doctor's face. 'Oh, yes,

the bomb. Well, I found a secret lift that took me underground, and there

it was. A bomb. And... Well, it's hanging over a shaft and I think they're

jolly well going to drop it down the shaft and then... Well, boom, I guess.'

The Doctor rubbed the back of neck. 'Mining the core of Sedna? No,

that would be stupid... unless, of course, they intended to pilot it.'

`Whoever heard of someone piloting a planet? That's rather silly.'

The Doctor narrowed his eyes. 'It's been attempted before.'

`Well, okay, maybe it has, but I wouldn't use a bomb to mine the core of

a planet. Now to blow a planet up, yes, that's why I would use a bomb.'

A look of sheer terror crossed Jeremy's face. 'Oh, Lor, they're going to blow this planet up! Doctor, we need to get off Sedna now. I'm too young

to die,' he added with a crack in his voice.

The Doctor walked the length of the alcove and patted Jeremy

reassuringly on the shoulder. 'Don't worry, young chap, they're not likely

to destroy Sedna while they're still on it, are they? No, I think it's more

likely that they intend to destroy the planet after they've left.'

`For Neptune? Oh, I say, maybe that's why they're invading Neptune,

because they're moving on.' The colour drained out of Jeremy cheeks.

Òh. Just remembered... They've launched another missile.'

For a moment the Doctor's face was grim, then he smiled slightly. 'Oh,

yes. Not too worry, Jeremy, that one won't be a problem.' He placed his

chisel on the worktop. 'Come on, it's time we found some answers.' He

set off to leave the alcove, and Jeremy turned to follow. 'There has to be

some other way we can meet these Arrangers.'

`That would be a no,' Aquati said, bristling into view. He eyed Jeremy

with obvious delight. 'And where did you run off to?'

Jeremy was put out by this. 'Me? You were right with me, and then you

weren't.'

`Well, you're back with us now.' The bristles of Aquati's brush moving

quickly, he rushed over and held Jeremy in a six-armed bear hug.

`Look, this is all very well and good,' the Doctor said, tapping Aquati's

shoulder. 'But we really must see the Arrangers now.'

Aquati released Jeremy, who threw the Doctor a thankful look. The

Doctor smiled back.

`You are more than aware of the rules, dear Thedoct, only those who

complete a Commission worthy of the Arrangers get to...'

Ì want him to come with me,' Jeremy said, speaking over Aquati. 'And

as someone who's got an audience I demand that he be allowed.' He

stopped, noting the indignant look on Aquati's face. 'If, erm, that's okay,

of course,' he added lamely.

`That is for the Arrangers to decide, I am simply a humble Siccati,

I cannot possibly speak for...'

Now it was the Doctor's turn to speak over Aquati. 'Good, then that's

decided. Now, time you introduced us to the Arrangers, don't you think?'

Èrm,' Jeremy said nervously, 'it's rather dark in here.'

The Doctor chuckled at his young friend's gift of understatement. It

was not just 'rather dark' it was pitch black. The Doctor lifted his hands

before his face, but his eyes did not adjust. He reached out for Jeremy and

accidentally hit him in the shoulder. Jeremy let out a squeal.

`Sorry,' he said, placing his hand firmly on Jeremy's shoulder. 'Just

don't move until we get some light. There could be anything in here with

us. Anything.'

He heard Jeremy gulp, and smiled to himself.

The lights came on suddenly, and the two men instinctively covered

their eyes.

The Doctor was the first to remove his hands.

They were standing at the end of a galleria. Although it paled in

comparison to the sheer depth of the Commissioning Hall, the Arrangers'

Galleria was, nonetheless, impressive in its own way. Scattered

throughout the small room were many varied works ofart. Paintings ofall

descriptions hung on the walls, finely sculpted statues stood tall and

magnificent, and nearby there was a row of lecterns on which sat various

works of prose and poetry, while around them they could hear the

differing sounds of music... but not just one composition, many different

compositions all overlapping into a beautiful symphony.

Jeremy opened his eyes and took in the exhibits. 'Oh,' he said, 'this is all rather...' He trailed off as his eyes rested on the three Siccati sitting at the end of the galleria.

Much like Aquati, these Siccati were beautiful, although Jeremy could not help but notice that they were older, although the one in the middle was noticeably older than the two either side of her.

She stood up, majestic in the long jewel-adorned dress. 'I am Trompel<Oeilism, and these are...'

À pleasure to make your acquaintance, no doubt,' the Doctor said, as he walked towards the three Arrangers, bowing all the while. 'But we are in a bit of a hurry so I hope you don't mind if I skip the protocol.' He stopped before them. 'Would you care to explain why you have a bomb hanging over a shaft in an underground cavern?'

Trompel regarded the Doctor with a look of distaste. 'You would be Thedoct>Orism?' When the Doctor nodded, the Siccati ran a hand over her bald, but painted, head. 'You have been allowed to enter as a favour to Jerem>Yism. Only he who created *The Magnificence* of Imperfection may address us.'

The Doctor narrowed his eyes, and was about to say something, but changed his mind. He looked over at his companion, who was still standing by the double doors, trying to blend in with the shadows. The Doctor smiled and let out a sigh. 'Jeremy, it's up to you. You wanted to be a journalist, now's your chance. Interview them.'

Jeremy's mouth opened, closed, opened again. No words came,

though. He walked forward, wringing his hands nervously. Erm ... right

you are. Um...' He stopped next to the Doctor and looked up at the Siccati.

He swallowed. 'Yes, why do you have that egg... sorry, I mean bomb,

underground? Is it to destroy the planet? You see the Doctor thinks it is,

and I think you're...'

`Jeremy!' the Doctor hissed.

`Sony. Ahem. Yes, that's the question.' Jeremy smiled winningly.

The Arrangers turned to look at each other. The two males seemed

uncertain, but Trompel waved a hand at Jeremy, so the Arranger to her

right replied.

`That "bomb" as you call it, Jerem>Yism, is our parting gift to this planet. As you know we are artists, and we have been given a mission by

the Great Designer Himself, a mission to complete the Great Tapestry.'

The Siccati paused, seeing the blank looks on their guests' faces.

Trompel coughed and leaned forward. 'We move from system to

system,' she explained, 'turning each and every planet we settle on into

a work of art. The most wonderful thing any mortal creature will ever lay

eyes on... so fabulous that certain species simply go out of their minds in

awe.' At this she nodded towards Jeremy. 'We are most impressed by the

capacity you have displayed.'

Jeremy shook his head. 'Pardon?'

`You have shown signs since entering our settlement that you were

becoming overawed by our beauty, our very being, but you have overcome

them. We have no understanding how, but you intrigue us.'

The Doctor looked at Jeremy in surprise, and shook his head.

`We start by creating the settlement, as you have seen, and when it is

time we move to the next world. But we release the Collographic into the

core of the planet, which explodes outwards, casting matrices that

reorder every molecule on the planet, turning it into a work of art.

A beautiful orb that lights up the system, inspiring all those who see it.'

`Fascinating. Now, why... oh, sorry. Jeremy, can you ask the Arrangers

why they are attacking those on Neptune?'

Rightio . Why, arm, why are you at war with your people on Neptune?'

`Neptune? Oh, you mean the planet on which our kith have decided to

settle? We call it Cerulean. As we said, we move from planet to planet, and

once we have been on a planet for one thousand felleries we send

a Grounding Sett to the next planet. There they begin a settlement, build

the city within so that when we are ready we can join them with the

minimum of fuss. What is unfortunate this time, however, is that the

Grounding Sett on Cerulean have decided they want to stay. Which

they

simply cannot do. We cannot complete the Great Tapestry if we miss out

one planet... just one will cause the whole Great Tapestry to unravel. We

cannot allow that.'

`So you launch missiles?' The Doctor could not believe it. 'This is all

about art? All those people, your own kin on Neptune, are being killed to

keep this Great Tapestry in *once* piece...' He wanted to carry on, but he did not know what else he could say. He glanced at Jeremy, and noticed that

he was biting his lip, obviously deep in thought about something.

`The Great Tapestry is all important,' one of the younger Arrangers

insisted. 'You are an alien here, and an unwelcome one. We will not

discuss this with you further.'

Realising he had overstepped his mark, the Doctor bowed before the

Arrangers. 'You're right, and I apologise for my outburst. But you must

understand, what you're doing is wrong.'

The Great Tapestry is all...'

'Important, yes, so you've said. But there must be another way.'

`There is no other.'

The answer came quickly, which, the Doctor assumed, meant they had

either considered all other options or they were just being pig-headed.

`Fishhooks!' Jeremy said suddenly. Every head turned to look at him.

His cheeks took on an unusual shade of red, but he gathered himself

up

to his full height and carried on regardless. 'What about a competition?

You're artists after all.'

À wonderful idea. A competition, yes,' the Doctor said, taking Jeremy's

lead. He rubbed his neck thoughtfully, then said, 'What if both you and

the Siccati on Neptune were to present their best work of art, and

whoever's is best wins?'

The three Arrangers looked at each other, and began talking in hushed

tones. The Doctor watched with interest, and passed a quick smile to

Jeremy. The young man smiled back hopefully. Eventually the Arrangers

stopped their discussion, and Trompel looked at the Doctor.

`Wins what?'

`Well,' the Doctor began, unsure of the answer.

Jeremy stepped forward, and began talking. As he talked the Doctor

noted the way Jeremy settled into his role, his awkwardness and nerves

fading into the background. 'If you win, the Siccati on Neptune agree to

allow the Tapestry to continue, but if they win they get to stay where they

are. They can continue the Tapestry in this system, as and when they're

ready, and you can move on to the next system. Either way the Tapestry

will continue, and no more lives will be lost. All round, I'd say that's a

rather super idea, and no one loses.'

Ìt is an interesting idea.' Trompel looked at her younger fellows, who both nodded. 'Very well. We shall speak to our kith on Cerulean.'

Jeremy beamed and the Doctor patted him on the back. 'Well done, young chap, very well done indeed.'

Òh, I say, it was nothing really,' Jeremy replied trying to brush it away,

but the Doctor could see the pride in his eyes.

`We have decided,' Trompel said, coughing.

The Doctor and Jeremy got up from their positions on the floor by the double doors and walked over to the Arrangers. They looked at each other

in anticipation.

Ì have spoken with the Sett leader on Cerulean, their so-called Virtuoso, and he thinks your plan is nothing short of amazing,

Jerem > Yism.' Trompel bristled forward and placed her hand on Jeremy's

head. 'You really are the most incredible creature I have ever had the fortune to meet.' She glanced at the Doctor. The Sett leader and I have agreed that we shall both choose an impartial adjudicator to judge the Commissions. Since they also have outsiders on Cerulean, one of them will be chosen...'

The Doctor smiled, finally realising why he Time Rammed himself on Neptune. It was his future self, or rather his present self, returning to be an adjudicator, with knowledge of this trip to Sedna. He turned to the

oldest Arranger, expecting to be chosen.

and so we chose you, Jerem>Yism, to be our adjudicator.'

The smile remained on the Doctor's face for Jeremy's benefit, but there was nothing natural about it now...

Well, then, he thought, I will *be the adjudicator on Neptune.*

Over a day had passed since Jeremy had been appointed adjudicator, and since then he had been treated like royalty, with the Doctor becoming something of a butler. Jeremy had expected the Doctor to resent this reversal of fortunes, but surprisingly the Doctor had taken to it with gusto. As he later explained, it gave him a chance to explore things without too much attention, since the Siccati only really wanted to meet the beautiful Jerem>Yism.

Now they were both back in the Commissioning Hall. A big screen had been set up in place of all the alcoves, upon which they could see thousands upon thousands of Siccati. The screen was split in two, showing both those on Sedna and Neptune. For a while, at the very least, a ceasefire was in effect, helped in no small part by the mysterious method the Siccati on Neptune had discovered to stop the Sednan Siccati's

missiles. Jeremy was secretly certain that both sides were enjoying the peace once again.

The Doctor stood to one side, arms folded, watching Jeremy as he stood

before the three Arrangers. Ever since the Siccati on Neptune had revealed

that they could now stop the missiles, the Doctor had been walking

around rather smugly. Even now his smile had more than a hint of self-

satisfaction about it. Jeremy returned the smile, nonetheless, and

shrugged inside the elegant coat he had been given. He liked the coat, but

it was rather big and heavy. The Doctor had assured him that he looked

great in it. Jeremy only hoped the Doctor was right, the last thing he

wanted to look like was a prat.

The second work of art was presented to Jeremy. Unlike the first, which

had been a sculpture of the very first Commissioning Hall from the

Siccati's home world, the second was a piece of music. It filled the whole

Hall, and from the lack of response from the Siccati on the screen, Jeremy

realised that only those inside could hear it.

The strings glided through the chamber. The adagio was sublime. It

was a full orchestral piece, although it was the strings that carried the

melody.

Once the tune had melted away, Jeremy wiped a stray tear and looked to

the floor. After a few moments, he lifted his head and looked at the

Arrangers.

`The music.' He smiled hopefully.

`Concerto, Jeremy,' the Doctor corrected him gently. 'It's called *The*

Contest Between Harmony and Intention, unless I'm very much mistaken. It's the canon-like composition that gives the piece its mesmerising beauty.

I've heard it before, never knew it was a Siccati piece, though.' He smiled.

`You learn something new everyday!'

The three Arrangers turned away. Jeremy watched them walk back to

their podium and he looked over at the Doctor, who was leaning against

the wall, his fingers tapping his lip. The Doctor recognised the look;

Jeremy wanted his help.

`You did agree to the rules,' he pointed out as he followed the Arrangers.

They sat down, and for a while none of them looked at either the Doctor

or Jeremy. Finally Trompel looked up, directly at Jeremy.

`You have chosen the Sett's lyricism,' she said. 'Just as the adjudicator

on Cerulean did.'

The Doctor suppressed his grin. 'Well, all good things and all that. Pack

up your troubles,' he added, and received blank looks from the Arrangers.

Èrm, what I mean is you agreed to the rules, which means the Siccati of

Neptune get to stay, and you get to go.'

Trompel shook her head, her eyes wide. The Doctor recognised that

look. It was fear. 'But what will we do? The Great Tapestry will never be

completed... we will have failed the Designer.'

`Not necessarily, my dear, your fellows on Neptune may change their

minds in time.' The Doctor spoke with a soothing tone, but it did nothing

to remove the fear.

Jeremy held his hand up. 'Excuse me?'

The Doctor looked over. 'What is it, Jeremy?'

Ì've been thinking, and I need to ask the Arrangers something.'

Trompel sat back in her seat and placed a hand on her bald head.

`Please.'

`Why did you choose my vase? I mean, I'm thankful you did, but really,

the Doctor's painting was so much better. Rather a lot, really.'

`The answer is simple, Jerem>Yism. The Commissioning Hall was set

up for one reason. I am dying.' Jeremy let out a gasp, and the old Arranger

smiled at him warmly. 'Fuss not, I have lived for many hundred felleries.

But the Arrangers are always three, and it is time we found someone to

replace me. Alas, there has been no one. All we ever witness is art so

perfect it makes one delirious, which is normally a grand thing, but it's

so...' She struggled to find a word.

`Boring?' the Doctor suggested, beginning to work out what was going

on.

`Yes, boring.' Trompel smiled. 'Thank you, Thedoct>Orism. It is, as you

say, boring. I have seen nothing but beauty all my life. Artwork that is so

perfect it has begun to make me feel empty. But your vase, Jerem>Yism...

there was something new about it. And it filled with me with a sense of

excitement, so much so that I had to see you.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Of course, perfection is boring; after a while, there

is nothing new to see. Whereas Jeremy's vase, for all the hard work that

went into it, was anything but perfect, and that sparked something in you,

something that probably died years ago. Imagination.'

The two younger Arrangers started muttering, smiles on their faces.

Trompel nodded effusively. 'Yes, yes! That's it exactly!'

`Which is exactly why you can go on with the Great Tapestry,' the Doctor

said. 'Express the art of imperfection... maybe your Designer did not

mean for the Tapestry to be perfect? This is your chance to explore that

possibility. To take pleasure in the imperfections of the universe, to start a new Great Tapestry. One that is not perfect, but equally as beautiful.'

Trompel took these words in and pondered them carefully. The Doctor

watched, happy to see that she was warming to the idea.

* * *

The Doctor and Jeremy stood outside the TARDIS. Together they watched

as the Siccati ships entered the Sednan sky.

`That was rather super of them to ask me to join the Arrangers.'

`Yes, Jeremy, it was. But I think your own brand of imperfection is a little too much for them at this time. They need to find their own.' The Doctor

smiled. 'Besides, the magnificence of imperfection can begin with only

two Arrangers.' He nodded. 'They'll do great things. Well done, Jeremy.'

`Pardon?'

`You got them to disarm a bomb that would have changed the face of

Sedna forever, and ended a war. And on top of that you've set them off on

a whole new course. Very well done indeed.' He patted his companion on

the shoulder and smiled. 'Well, come on, then, time we were going,' he

said and pushed open the narrow door. 'We were due on Neptune some

time ago.'

Jeremy made to follow the Doctor inside. 'We were?'

Òh, yes, who do you think the adjudicator on Neptune was? Me, of

course!'

Jeremy stopped and looked back at the Sednan landscape. 'What about

the Siccati city?'

The Doctor turned and looked over Jeremy's shoulder. 'I shouldn't

worry about that. It will be discovered in the late twenty-first century

when humans first set foot on this planet, or at least the ruins will be. Pity they'll never know what it looked like.'

`No, but I do.' Jeremy smiled at this thought, feeling his Siccati coat underneath the ADJ. They carried on inside, closing the door behind them.

For a brief instant the TARDIS stood there, a speck of blue against the red background...

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